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TWO ON A TOWER.

VOL. I.

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TWO ON A TOWER.

A Romance.

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TWO ON A TOWER.

CHAPTER I.

On an early winter afternoon, clear but not cold, when the vegetable world was a weird multitude of skeletons through whose ribs the sun shone freely, a gleaming landau came to a pause on the crest of a hill in Wessex. The spot was where the old Melchester Road, which the carriage had hitherto followed, was joined by a drive that led round into a park at no great distance off.

The footman alighted, and went to the occupant of the carriage, a lady about eight- or nine-and-twenty. She was looking

through the opening afforded by a field-gate at the undulating stretch of country beyond. In pursuance of some remark from her the servant looked in the same direction.

The central feature of the middle distance, as they beheld it, was a circular isolated hill, of no great elevation, which placed itself in strong chromatic contrast with a wide acreage of surrounding arable by being covered with fir-trees. The trees were all of one size and age, so that their tips assumed the precise curve of the hill they grew upon. This pine-clad protuberance was yet further marked out from the general landscape by having on its summit a tower in the form of a classical column, which, though partly immersed in the plantation, rose above the tree-tops to a considerable height. Upon this object the eyes of lady and servant were bent.

"Then there is no road leading near it?" she asked.

"Nothing nearer than where we are now, my lady."

"Then drive home," she said after a moment. And the carriage rolled on its way.

A few days later, the same lady, in the same carriage, passed that spot again. Her eyes, as before, turned to the distant tower.

"Nobbs," she said to the coachman, "could you find your way home through that field, so as to get near the outskirts of the plantation where the column is?"

The coachman regarded the field. "Well, my lady," he observed, "in dry weather we might drive in there by inching and pinching, and so get across by Five-and-Twenty Acres, all being well. But the ground is so heavy after these rains that—perhaps it would hardly be safe to try it now."

"Perhaps not," she assented indifferently. "Remember it, will you, at a drier time?"

And again the carriage sped along the road, the lady's eyes resting on the segmental hill, the blue trees that muffled it, and the column that formed its apex, till they were out of sight.

A long time elapsed before that lady drove over the hill again. It was February; the soil was now unquestionably dry, the weather and scene being in other respects much as they had been before. The familiar shape of the column seemed to remind her that at last an opportunity for a close inspection had arrived. Giving her directions, she saw the gate opened, and after a little manœuvring the carriage swayed slowly into the uneven field.

Although the pillar stood upon the hereditary estate of her husband, the lady had

never visited it, owing to its insulation by this well-nigh impracticable ground. The drive to the base of the hill was tedious and jerky, and on reaching it she alighted, directing that the carriage should be driven back empty over the clods, to wait for her on the nearest edge of the field. She then ascended beneath the trees on foot.

The column now showed itself as a much more important erection than it had appeared from the road, or the park, or the windows of Welland House, her residence hard by, whence she had surveyed it hundreds of times without ever feeling a sufficient interest in its details to investigate them. The column had been erected in the last century, as a substantial memorial of her husband's great-grandfather, a respectable officer who had fallen in the American war, and the reason of her lack of interest was partly owing to her rela-

tions with this husband, of which more anon. It was little beyond the sheer desire for something to do—the chronic desire of her curiously lonely life—that had brought her here now. She was in a mood to welcome anything that would in some measure disperse an almost killing *ennui*. She would have welcomed even a misfortune. She had heard that from the summit of the pillar four counties could be seen. Whatever pleasurable effect was to be derived from looking into four counties at the same time she resolved to enjoy to-day.

The fir-shrouded hill-top turned out to be (as some antiquaries said) an old Roman camp,—if it were not (as some insisted) an old British castle, or (as others swore) an old Saxon field of Witenagemote,—with remains of an outer and an inner vallum, a winding path leading up between their overlapping ends by an easy ascent. The

spikelets from the trees formed a soft carpet over the route, and occasionally a brake of brambles barred the interspaces of the trunks. Soon she stood immediately at the foot of the column.

It had been built in the Tuscan order of classic architecture, and was really a tower, being hollow, with steps inside. The gloom and solitude which prevailed round the base were remarkable. The sob of the environing trees was here expressively manifest; and moved by the light breeze, their thin straight stems rocked in seconds, like inverted pendulums; while some boughs and twigs rubbed the pillar's sides, or occasionally clicked in catching each other. Below the level of their summits the masonry was lichen-stained and mildewed, for the sun never pierced that moaning cloud of blue-black vegetation. Pads of moss grew in the joints of the stone-work,

and here and there shade-loving insects had engraved on the mortar patterns of no human style or meaning; but curious and suggestive. Above the trees the case was different: the pillar rose into the sky a bright and cheerful thing, unimpeded, clean, and flushed with the sunlight.

The spot was seldom visited by a pedestrian, except perhaps in the shooting season. The rarity of human intrusion was evidenced by the mazes of rabbit-runs, the feathers of shy birds, the exuviæ of reptiles; as also by the fresh and uninterrupted paths of squirrels down the sides of trunks, and thence horizontally away. The circumstance of the plantation being an island in the midst of an arable plain sufficiently accounted for this lack of visitors. Few unaccustomed to such places can be aware of the insulating effect of ploughed ground, when no necessity compels people to

traverse it. This rotund hill of trees and brambles, standing in the centre of a ploughed field of some ninety or a hundred acres, was probably visited less frequently than a rock would have been visited in a lake of equal extent.

She walked round the column to the other side, where she found the door through which the interior was reached. The paint, if it had ever had any, was all washed from its face, and down the decaying surface of the boards liquid rust from the nails and hinges had run in red stains. Over the door was a stone tablet, bearing, apparently, letters or words; but the inscription, whatever it was, had been smoothed over with a plaster of lichen.

Here stood this aspiring piece of masonry, erected as the most conspicuous and ineffaceable reminder of a man that could be thought of; and yet the whole aspect

of the memorial betokened forgetfulness. Probably not a dozen people within the district knew the name of the person commemorated, while perhaps not a soul remembered whether the column were hollow or solid, whether with or without a tablet explaining its date and purpose. She herself had lived within a mile of it for the last five years, and had never come near it till now.

She had no intention of ascending, but finding that the door was not fastened she pushed it open with her foot, and entered. A scrap of writing-paper lay within, and arrested her attention by its freshness. Some human being, then, knew the spot, despite her surmises. But as the paper had nothing on it, no clue was afforded; yet, feeling herself the proprietor of the column and of all around it, her self-assertiveness was sufficient to lead her on.

The staircase was lighted by slits in the wall, and there was no difficulty in reaching the top, the steps being quite unworn. The trap door leading on to the roof was open, and on looking through it an interesting spectacle met her eye.

A youth was sitting on a stool in the centre of the lead flat whith formed the summit of the column, his eye being applied to the end of a large telescope that stood before him on a tripod. This sort of presence was unexpected, and the lady started back into the shade of the opening. The only effect produced upon him by her footfall was an impatient wave of the hand, without removing his eye from the instrument, as if to forbid her or anybody to interrupt him.

Pausing where she stood, the lady examined the aspect of the individual who thus made himself so completely at home

on a building which she deemed her unquestioned property. He was a youth who might properly have been characterized by a word the judicious chronicler would not readily use in such a connexion, preferring to reserve it for raising images of the opposite sex. Whether because no deep felicity is likely to arise from the circumstance, or from any other reason, to say in these days that a youth is beautiful is not to award him that amount of credit which the expression would have carried with it if he had lived in the times of the Classical Dictionary. So much, indeed, is the reverse the case that the assertion creates an awkwardness in saying anything more about him. The beautiful youth usually verges so perilously on the incipient coxcomb, who is about to become the Lothario or Juan among the neighbouring maidens, that, for the due understanding

of our present young man, his sublime innocence of any thought concerning his own material aspect, or that of others, is most fervently asserted, and must be as fervently believed.

Such as he was, there the lad stood. The sun shone full in his face, and on his head he wore a black velvet skull-cap, leaving to view below it a curly margin of very light, shining hair, which accorded well with the flush upon his cheek.

He had such a complexion as that with which Raffaelle enriches the countenance of the youthful son of Zacharias,—a complexion which, though clear, is far enough removed from virgin delicacy, and suggests plenty of sun and wind as its accompaniment. His features were sufficiently straight in the contours to correct the beholder's first impression that the head was the head of a girl. Beside

him stood a little oak table, and in front was the telescope.

His visitor had ample time to make these observations ; and she may have done so all the more keenly through being herself of a totally opposite type. Her hair was black as midnight, her eyes had no less deep a shade, and her complexion showed the richness demanded as a support to these decided features. As she continued to look at the pretty fellow before her, apparently so far abstracted into some speculative world as scarcely to know a real one, a warmer wave of her warm temperament glowed visibly through her, and a qualified observer might from this have hazarded a guess that there was Romance blood in her veins.

But even the interest attaching to the youth could not arrest her attention for ever, and as he made no further signs of

moving his eye from the instrument she broke the silence with—

"What do you see?—something happening somewhere?"

"Yes, quite a catastrophe!" he automatically murmured, without moving round.

"What?"

"A cyclone in the sun."

The lady paused, as if to consider the doubtful weight of that event in the scale of terrene life.

"Will it make any difference to us here?" she asked.

The young man by this time seemed to be awakened to the consciousness that somebody unusual was talking to him; he turned, and started.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I thought it was my relative come to look after me! She often comes about this time."

He continued to look at her and forget the sun, just such a reciprocity of influence as might have been expected between a dark lady and a flaxen-haired youth making itself apparent in the faces of each.

"Don't let me interrupt your observations," said she.

"Ah, no," said he, again applying his eye; whereupon his face lost the animation which her presence had lent it, and became immutable as that of a bust, though superadding to the serenity of repose the sensitiveness of life. The expression that settled on him was one of awe. Not unaptly might it have been said that he was worshipping the sun. Among the various intensities of that worship which have prevailed since the first intelligent being saw the luminary decline westward, as the young man now beheld it doing, his was not the weakest. He was engaged in

what may be called a very chastened or schooled form of that first and most natural of adorations.

"But would you like to see it?" he recommenced. "It is an event that is witnessed only about once in two or three years, though it may occur often enough."

She assented, and looked through the shaded eye-piece, and saw a whirling mass, in the centre of which the blazing globe seemed to be laid bare to its core. It was a peep into a maelstrom of fire, taking place where nobody had ever been or ever would be.

"It is the strangest thing I ever beheld," she said. Then he looked again; till, wondering who her companion could be, she asked, "Are you often here?"

"Every night when it is not cloudy, and often in the day."

"Ah, night, of course. The heavens must be beautiful from this point."

"They are rather more than that."

"Indeed! Have you entirely taken possession of this column?"

"Entirely."

"But it is my column," she said, with smiling asperity.

"Then are you Lady Constantine, wife of the absent Sir Blount Constantine?"

"I am Lady Constantine."

"Ah, then I agree that it is your ladyship's. But will you allow me to rent it of you for a time, Lady Constantine?"

"You have taken it, whether I allow it or not. However, in the interests of science it is advisable that you continue your tenancy. Nobody knows you are here, I suppose?"

"Hardly anybody."

He then took her down a few steps into

the interior, and showed her some ingenious contrivances for stowing articles away.

"Nobody ever comes near the column,—or, as it's called here, Rings-Hill Speer," he continued; "and when I first came up it nobody had been here for thirty or forty years. The staircase was choked with daws' nests and feathers, but I cleared them out."

"I understood the column was always kept locked?"

"Yes, it has been so. When it was built, in 1782, the key was given to my great-grandfather, to keep by him in case visitors should happen to want it. He lived just down there where I live now."

He denoted by a nod a little dell lying immediately beyond the ploughed land which environed them.

"He kept it in his bureau, and as the

bureau descended to my grandfather, my mother, and myself, the key descended with it. After the first thirty or forty years, nobody ever asked for it. One day I saw it, lying rusty in its niche, and, finding that it belonged to this column, I took it and came up. I stayed here till it was dark, and the stars came out, and that night I resolved to be an astronomer. I came back here from school several months ago, and I mean to be an astronomer still."

He lowered his voice and added :

"I aim at nothing less than the dignity and office of Astronomer Royal, if I live. Perhaps I shall not live."

"I don't see why you should suppose that," said she. "How long are you going to make this your observatory ?"

"About a year longer—till I have obtained a practical familiarity with the

heavens. Ah, if I only had a good equatorial!"

"What is that?"

"A proper instrument for my pursuit. But time is short, and science is infinite,—how infinite only those who study astronomy fully realize,—and perhaps I shall be worn out before I make my mark."

She seemed to be greatly struck with the odd mixture in him of scientific earnestness and melancholy mistrust of all things human. Perhaps it was owing to the nature of his studies.

"You are often on this tower alone at night?" she said.

"Yes; at this time of the year particularly, and while there is no moon. I observe from seven or eight till about two in the morning, with a view to my great work on variable stars. But with such a

telescope as this—well, I must put up with it!"

"Can you see Saturn's ring and Jupiter's moons?"

He said drily that he could manage to do that, not without some contempt for the state of her knowledge.

"I have never seen any planet or star through a telescope."

"If you will come the first clear night, Lady Constantine, I will show you any number. I mean, at your express wish; not otherwise."

"I should like to come, and possibly may at some time. These stars that vary so much—sometimes evening stars, sometimes morning stars, sometimes in the east, and sometimes in the west—have always interested me."

"Ah—now there is a reason for your not coming. Your ignorance of the reali-

ties of astronomy is so satisfactory that I will not disturb it except at your serious request."

"But I wish to be enlightened."

"Let me caution you against it."

"Is enlightenment on the subject, then, so terrible?"

"Yes, indeed."

She laughingly declared that nothing could have so piqued her curiosity as his statement, and turned to descend. He helped her down the stairs and through the briers. He would have gone further, and crossed the open corn-land with her, but she preferred to go alone. He then retraced his way to the top of the column, but, instead of looking longer at the sun, watched her diminishing towards the distant fence, behind which waited the carriage. When in the midst of the field, a dark spot on an area of brown, there

crossed her path a moving figure, whom it was as difficult to distinguish from the earth he trod as the caterpillar from its leaf, by reason of the excellent match between his clothes and the clods. He was one of a dying-out generation who retained the principle, nearly unlearnt now, that a man's habiliments should be in harmony with his environment. Lady Constantine and this figure halted beside each other for some minutes; then they went on their several ways.

The brown person was a labouring man known to the world of Welland as Haymoss (the encrustod form of the word Amos, to adopt the phrase of philologists). The reason of the halt had been some inquiries addressed to him by Lady Constantine.

"Who is that—Amos Fry, I think?" she had asked.

"Yes, my lady," said Haymoss; "a

homely barley driller, born under the very eavesdroppings of your ladyship's smallest out-buildings, in a manner of speaking,—though your ladyship was neither born nor 'tempted at that time."

"Who lives in the old house behind the plantation?"

"Old Gammer Martin, my lady, and her grandson."

"He has neither father nor mother, then?"

"Not a single one, my lady."

"Where was he educated?"

"At Warborne,—a place where they draw up young gam'sters' brains like rhubarb under a ninepenny pan, my lady, excusing my common way. They hit so much larning into en that 'a could talk like the day of Pentecost; which is a wonderful thing for a simple boy, and his mother only the plainest ciphering woman in the world.

Warborne Grammar School—that's where 'twas 'a went to. His father, the reverent Pa'son St. Cleeve, made a terrible bruckle hit in 's marrying, in the sight of the high. He were the curate here, my lady, for a length o' time."

"Oh, curate," said Lady Constantine. It was before I knew the village."

"Ay, long and merry ago! And he married Farmer Martin's daughter—Giles Martin, a limberish man, who used to go rather bad upon his lags, if you can mind. I knowed the man well enough; who should know en better! The maid was a poor windling thing, and, though a playward piece o' flesh when he married her, 'a socked and sighed, and went out like a snoff! Yes, my lady; well, when Pa'son St. Cleeve married this homespun woman the toppermost folk wouldn't speak to his wife. Then he dropped a cuss or two, and said he'd no

longer get his living by curing their two-penny souls o' such damn nonsense as that (excusing my common way), and he took to farming straightway, and then 'a dropped down dead in a nor'-west thunderstorm; it being said—hee-hee!—that Master God was in tantrums wi' en for leaving his service,—hee-hee! I give the story as I heard it, my lady, but be dazed if I believe in such trumpery behaviour of the fokes in the sky, nor anything else that's said about 'em, good or bad. Well, Swithin, the boy, was sent to the grammar school, as I say for; but what with having two stations of life in his blood, he's good for nothing, my lady. He mopes about—sometimes here, and sometimes there; nobody troubles about en."

Lady Constantine thanked her informant, and proceeded onward. To her, as a woman, the most curious feature in

the afternoon's incident was that this lad, of striking beauty, scientific attainments, and cultivated bearing, should be linked, on the maternal side, with a local agricultural family through his father's matrimonial eccentricity. A more attractive feature in the case was that the same youth, so capable of being ruined by flattery, blandishment, pleasure, even gross prosperity, should be at present living on in a primitive Eden of unconsciousness, with aims towards whose accomplishment a Caliban shape would have been as effective as his own.

CHAPTER II.

SWITHIN ST. CLEEVE lingered on at his post, until the more sanguine birds of the plantation, already recovering from their midwinter anxieties, piped a short evening hymn to the vanishing sun.

The landscape was gently concave; with the exception of tower and hill, there were no points on which late rays might linger; and hence the dish-shaped ninety acres of tilled land assumed a uniform hue of shade quite suddenly. The one or two stars that appeared were quickly clouded over, and it was soon obvious that there would be no sweeping the heavens that

night. After tying a piece of tarpaulin, which had once seen service on his maternal grandfather's farm, over all the apparatus around him, he went down the stairs in the dark, and locked the door.

With the key in his pocket, he descended through the underwood on the side of the slope opposite to that trodden by Lady Constantine, and crossed the field in a line mathematically straight, and in a manner that left no traces, by keeping in the same furrow all the way on tiptoe. In a few minutes he reached a little dell, which occurred quite unexpectedly on the other side of the field-fence, and descended to a venerable thatched house, whose enormous roof, broken up by dormers as big as haycocks, could be seen even in the twilight. Over the white walls, built of chalk in the lump, outlines of creepers

formed dark patterns, as if drawn in charcoal.

Inside the house his maternal grandmother was sitting by a wood fire. Before it stood a pipkin, in which something was evidently kept warm. An eight-legged oak table in the middle of the room was laid for a meal. This woman of eighty, in a large mob cap, under which she wore a little cap to keep the other clean, retained faculties but little blunted. She was gazing into the flames, with her hands upon her knees, quietly re-enacting in her brain certain of the long chain of episodes, pathetic, tragical, and humorous, which had constituted the parish history for the last sixty years. On Swithin's entry she looked up at him in a sideway direction.

"You should not have waited for me, granny," he said.

"'Tis of no account, my child. I've had a nap while sitting here. Yes, I've had a nap, and went straight up into my old country again, as usual. The place was as natural as when I left it,—e'en just threescore years ago! All the folks and my old aunt were there, as when I was a child,—'and when I awoke, behold it was a dream!' I suppose if I were really to set out and go there, hardly a soul would be left alive to say to me, dog how art! But tell Hannah to stir her stumps and serve supper—though I'd fain do it myself, the poor old soul is getting so unhandy!"

Hannah revealed herself to be much nimbler and several years younger than granny, though of this the latter seemed to be oblivious. When the meal was nearly over Mrs. Martin produced the contents of the mysterious vessel by the

fire, saying that she had caused it to be brought in from the back kitchen, because Hannah was hardly to be trusted with such things, she was becoming so childish.

"What is it, then?" said Swithin. "Oh, one of your special puddings." At sight of it, however, he added reproachfully, "Now, granny!"

Instead of being round, it was in shape an irregular boulder that had been exposed to the weather for centuries—a little scrap pared off here, and a little piece broken away there; the general aim being, nevertheless, to avoid destroying the symmetry of the pudding, while taking as much as possible of its substance.

"The fact is," added Swithin, "the pudding is half gone!"

"I've only sliced off the merest paring once or twice, to taste if it was well

done!" pleaded granny Martin, with wounded feelings. "I said to Hannah, when she took it up, 'Put it here to keep it warm, as there's a better fire than in the back kitchen."

"Well, I am not going to eat any of it!" said Swithin decisively, as he rose from the table, pushed away his chair, and went up-stairs; the "other station of life that was in his blood," and which had been brought out by the grammar school, probably stimulating him.

"Ah, the world is an ungrateful city! 'Twas a pity I didn't take my poor name off this earthly calendar and creep under ground sixty long years ago, instead of leaving my own county to come here!" mourned old Mrs. Martin. "But I told his mother how 'twould be—marrying so many notches above her. The child was sure to chaw high, like his father!"

When Swithin had been up-stairs a minute or two, however, he altered his mind, and, coming down again, ate all the pudding, with the aspect of a person undertaking a deed of great magnanimity. The relish with which he did so restored the unison that knew no more serious interruptions than such as this.

"Mr. Torkingham has been here this afternoon," said his grandmother; "and he wants me to let him meet some of the choir here to-night for practice. They who live at this end of the parish won't go to his house to try over the tunes, because 'tis so far, they say; and so 'tis, poor men. So he's going to see what coming to them will do. He asks if you would like to join."

"I would if I had not so much to do."

"But it is cloudy to-night."

"Yes; but I have calculations without

end, granny. Now, don't you tell him I'm in the house, will you? and then he'll not ask for me."

"But if he should, must I then tell a lie, Lord forgive me?"

"No, you can say I'm up-stairs; he must think what he likes. Not a word about the astronomy to any of them, whatever you do. I should be called a visionary, and all sorts."

"So thou beest, child. Why can't ye do something that's of use"—

At the sound of footsteps Swithin beat a hasty retreat up-stairs, where he struck a light, and revealed a table covered with books and papers, while round the walls hung star-maps, and other diagrams illustrative of celestial phenomena. In a corner stood a huge pasteboard tube, which a close inspection would have shown to be intended for a telescope.

Swithin hung a thick cloth over the window, in addition to the curtains, and sat down to his papers. On the ceiling was a black stain of smoke, and under this he placed his lamp, evidencing that the midnight oil was consumed on that precise spot very often.

Meanwhile, there had entered to the room below a personage who, to judge from her voice and the quick pit-pat of her feet, was a female young and blithe. Mrs. Martin welcomed her by the title of Miss Tabitha Lark, and inquired what wind had brought her that way; to which the visitor replied that she had come for the singing.

"Sit ye down, then," said granny. "And do you still go to the House to read to my lady?"

"Yes, I go and read, Mrs. Martin; but as to getting my lady to hearken, that's

more than a team of six horses could force her to do."

The girl had a remarkably smart and fluent utterance, which was probably a cause, or a consequence, of her vocation.

"'Tis the same story, then?" said grandmother Martin.

"Yes. Eaten out with listlessness. She's neither sick nor sorry, but how dull and dreary she is, only herself can tell. When I get there in the morning, there she is sitting up in bed, for my lady don't care to get up; and then she makes me bring this book and that book, till the bed is heaped up with immense volumes that half bury her, making her look, as she leans upon her elbow, like the stoning of Stephen in the church window. She yawns; then she looks towards the tall glass; then she looks out at the weather, mooning her great black eyes, and fixing

them on the sky as if they stuck there, while my tongue goes flick-flack along, a hundred and fifty words a minute; then she looks at the clock; then she asks me what I've been reading."

"Ah, poor soul!" said granny. "No doubt she says in the morning, 'Would God it were evening,' and in the evening, 'Would God it were morning,' like the disobedient woman in Deuteronomy."

Swithin, in the room overhead, had suspended his calculations, for the dialogue interested him. There now crunched heavier steps outside the door, and his grandmother could be heard greeting sundry representatives of the bass and tenor voice, who lent a cheerful and well-known personality to the names Sammy Blore, Nat Chapman, Hezekiah Biles, and Haymoss Fry (the latter being one with whom the reader has already a distant acquain-

tance); besides these came small producers of treble, who had not yet developed into such distinctive units of society as to require particularizing.

"Is the good man come?" asked Nat Chapman. "No,—I see we be here afore him. And how is it with aged women to-night, Mrs. Martin?"

"Tedious traipsing enough with this one, Nat. Sit ye down. Well, little Freddy, you don't wish in the morning that 'twere evening, and at evening that 'twere morning again, do you, Freddy, trust ye for it?"

"Now, who might wish such a thing as that, Mrs. Martin?—nobody in this parish?" asked Sammy Blore curiously.

"My lady is always wishing it," spoke up Miss Tabitha Lark.

"Oh, she! Nobody can be answerable for the wishes of that onnatural tribe of

mankind. Not but that the woman's heart-strings is tried in many aggravating ways."

"Ah, poor woman!" said granny. "The state she finds herself in—neither maid, wife, nor widow, as you may say—is not the primest form of life for keeping in good spirits. How long is it since she has heard from Sir Blount, Tabitha?"

"Two years and more," said the young woman. "He went into one side of Africa, as it might be, three St. Martin's days back. I can mind it, because 'twas my birthday. And he meant to come out the other side. But he didn't. He has never come out at all."

"For all the world like losing a rat in a barley-mow," said Hezekiah, glancing round for corroboration. "He's lost, though you know where he is."

His comrades nodded.

"Ay, my lady is a walking weariness, that's plain. I seed her yawn just at the very moment when the fox was halloaed away by Harton Copse, and the hounds runned en all but past her carriage wheels. If I were she I'd see a little life; though there's no fair, club-walking, nor feast, to speak of, till Easter week,—that's true."

"She dares not. She's under solemn oath and testament to do no such thing."

"Be cust if I would keep any such oath and testament! But here's the pa'son, if my ears don't deceive me."

There was a noise of horse's hoofs without, a stumbling against the door-scraper, a tethering to the window-shutter, a creaking of the door on its hinges, and a voice which Swithin recognized as Mr. Torkingham's. He greeted each of the previous arrivals by name, and stated that he was

glad to see them all so punctually assembled.

"Ay, sir," said Haymoss Fry. "'Tis only my jints that have kept me from assembling myself long ago. I'd assemble upon the top of Welland Steeple, if 'tweren't for my jints. I assure ye, Pa'son Tarkenham, that in the clitch o' my knees, where the rain used to come through when I was cutting clots for the new lawn, in old my lady's time, 'tis as if rats wez gnawing, every now and then. When a feller's young he's too small in the brain to see how soon a constitution can be squandered, worse luck!"

"True," said Biles, to fill the time while the parson was engaged in finding the Psalms. "A man's a fool till he's forty. Often have I thought, when hay-pitching, and the small of my back seeming no stouter than a harnet's, 'The devil send

that I had but the making of labouring men for a twelvemonth!' I'd gie every man jack two good backbones, even if the alteration was as wrong as forgery."

"Four,—four backbones," said Haymoss, decisively.

"Yes, four," threw in Sammy Blore, with additional weight of experience. "For you want one in front for breast-ploughing and such like, one at the right side for ground-dressing, and one at the left side for turning mixens."

"Well, four. Then next I'd move every man's wyndpipe a good span away from his glutchpipe, so that at harvest time he could fetch breath in 's drinking, without being choked and strangled as he is now. Thinks I, when I feel the victuals going—"

"Now we'll begin," interrupted Mr. Torkingham, his mind returning to this

world again on concluding his search for a hymn.

Thereupon the racket of chair-legs on the floor signified that they were settling into their seats,—a disturbance which Swithin took advantage of by going on tiptoe across the floor above, and putting sheets of paper over knot-holes in the boarding at points where carpet was lacking, that his lamp-light might not shine down. The absence of a ceiling beneath rendered his position virtually that of one suspended in the same apartment.

The parson announced the tune, and his voice burst forth with "Onward, Christian soldiers!" in notes of rigid cheerfulness.

In this start however, he was joined only by the girls and boys, the men furnishing but an accompaniment of ahas and hems. Mr. Torkingham stopped, and Sammy Blore spoke,—

"Beg your pardon, sir,—if you'll deal mild with us a moment. What with the wind and walking, my throat's as rough as a grater; and not knowing you were going to hit up that minute, I hadn't hawked, and I don't think Hezzy and Nat had, either,—had ye, souls?"

"I hadn't done it thoroughly, that's true," said Hezekiah.

"Quite right of you, then, to speak," said Mr. Torkingham. "Don't mind explaining; we are here for practice. Now clear your throats, then, and at it again."

There was a noise as of atmospheric hoes and scrapers, and the bass contingent at last got under way with a time of its own:

"Honwerd, Christen sojers!"

"Ah, that's where we are so defective—the pronunciation," interrupted the parson. "Now repeat after me: 'On-ward, Christ-ian, sol-diers."

The choir repeated like an exaggerative echo : " On-wed, Chris-ting, sol-jaws ! "

" Better ! " said the parson, in the strenuously sanguine tones of a man who got his living by discovering a bright side in things where it was not very perceptible to other people. " But it should not be given with quite so extreme an accent ; or we may be called affected by other parishes. And, Nathaniel Chapman, there's a jauntiness in your manner of singing which is not quite becoming. Why don't you sing more earnestly ? "

" My conscience won't let me, sir. They say every man for himself ; but, thank God, I'm not so mean as to lessen old fokes' chances by singing earnest, and they so much nearer the need o't."

" It's bad reasoning, Nat, I fear. Now, perhaps we had better sol-fa the tune. Eyes on your books, please. *Sol-sol ! fa-fa ! mi*"—

"I can't sing like that, not I!" said Sammy Blore, with condemnatory astonishment. "I can sing genuine music, like F and G; but not anything so much out of the order of nater as that."

"Perhaps you've brought the wrong book, sir?" chimed in Haymoss, kindly. "I've knowed music early in life, and late,—in short, ever since Luke Sneap broke his new fiddle-bow in the wedding psalm, when Pa'son Wilton brought home his bride (you can mind the time, Sammy?—at 'His wife, like a fair fertile vine, her lovely fruit shall bring,' when the young woman turned as red as a rose, not knowing 'twas coming). I've knowed music ever since then, I say, sir, and never heard the like o' that. Every martel note had his name of A, B, C, at that time."

"Yes, yes, men; but this is a more recent system!"

"Still, you can't alter a old-established note that's A or B by nater," rejoined Haymoss, with yet deeper conviction that Mr. Torkingham was getting off his head. "Now sound A, neighbour Sammy, and let's have a slap at Christen sojers again, and show the Pa'son the true way!"

Sammy produced a private tuning-fork, black and grimy, which, being about seventy years of age, and wrought before pianoforte builders had sent up the pitch to make their instruments brilliant, was nearly a note flatter than the parson's. While an argument as to the true pitch was in progress, there came a knocking without.

"Somebody's at the door!" said a little treble girl.

"Thought I heard a knock before!" said the relieved choir.

The latch was lifted, and a man asked

from the darkness, "Is Mr. Torkingham here?"

"Yes, Mills. What do you want?"

It was the parson's man.

"Oh, if you please," says Mills, showing an advanced margin of himself round the door, "Lady Constantine wants to see you very particular, sir, and could you call on her after dinner, if you ben't engaged with poor fokes? She's just had a letter,—so they say,—and it's about that, I believe."

Finding, on looking at his watch, that it was necessary to start at once if he meant to see her that night, the parson cut short the practising, and, naming another night for meeting, he withdrew. All the singers assisted him on to his cob, and watched him till he disappeared over the edge of the glen.

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Torkingham trotted briskly onward to his house, a distance of about a mile, each cottage, as it revealed its half-buried position by its single light, appearing like a one-eyed night creature watching him from an ambush. Leaving his horse at the parsonage, he performed the remainder of the journey on foot, crossing the park towards Welland House by a stile and path, till he struck into the drive near the north door of the mansion.

This drive, it may be remarked, was also the common highway to the lower village, and hence Lady Constantine's residence

and park, as is occasionally the case with old-fashioned manors, possessed none of the exclusiveness found in some aristocratic settlements. The parishioners looked upon the park avenue as their natural thoroughfare, particularly for christenings, weddings, and funerals, which passed the squire's mansion with due considerations as to the scenic effect of the same from the manor windows. Hence the house of Constantine, when going out from its breakfast, had been continually crossed on the doorstep for the last two hundred years by the houses of Hodge and Giles in full cry to dinner. At present these collisions were but too infrequent, for though the villagers passed the north front door as regularly as ever, they seldom met a Constantine. Only one was there to be met, and she had no zest for outings before noon.

The long, low front of the Great House, as it was called by the parish, stretching from end to end of the terrace, was in darkness as the vicar slackened his pace before it, and only the distant fall of water disturbed the stillness of the manorial precincts.

On gaining admittance, he found Lady Constantine waiting to receive him. She wore a heavy dress of velvet and lace, and being the only person in the spacious apartment, she looked small and isolated. In her left hand she held a letter and a couple of at-home cards. The soft dark eyes which she raised to him as he entered—large, and melancholy by circumstance far more than by quality—were the natural indices of a warm and affectionate, perhaps slightly voluptuous temperament, languishing for want of something to do, cherish, or suffer for.

Mr. Torkingham seated himself. His boots, which had seemed elegant in the farm-house, appeared rather clumsy here, and his coat, that was a model of tailoring when he stood amid the choir, now exhibited decidedly strained relations with his limbs. Three years had passed since his induction to the living of Welland, but he had never as yet found means to establish that relationship with Lady Constantine which usually grows up, in the course of time, between parsonage and manor-house,—unless, indeed, either side should surprise the other by showing respectively a weakness for awkward modern ideas on land-ownership, or on church formulas, which had not been the case here. The present meeting, however, seemed likely to initiate such a relationship.

There was an appearance of confidence on Lady Constantine's face; she said she

was so very glad that he had come; and, looking down at the letter in her hand, was on the point of pulling it from its envelope; but she did not. After a moment she went on more quickly: "I wanted your advice, or rather your opinion, on a serious matter,—on a point of conscience." Saying which, she laid down the letter and looked at the cards.

It might have been apparent to a more penetrating eye than the vicar's that Lady Constantine, either from timidity, misgiving, or reconviction, had swerved from her intended communication, or perhaps decided to begin at the other end.

The parson, who had been expecting a question on some local business or intelligence, at the tenor of her words altered his face to the higher branch of his profession.

"I hope I may find myself of service,

on that or any other question," he said gently.

"I hope so. You may possibly be aware, Mr. Torkingham, that my husband, Sir Blount Constantine, was, not to mince matters, a mistaken—somewhat jealous man. Yet you may hardly have discerned it in the short time you knew him."

"I had some little knowledge of Sir Blount's character in that respect."

"Well, on this account my married life with him was not of the most comfortable kind." (Lady Constantine's voice dropped to a more pathetic note.) "I am sure I gave him no cause for suspicion; though had I known his disposition sooner I should hardly have dared to marry him. But his jealousy and doubt of me were not so strong as to divert him from a purpose of his,—a mania for African lion-hunting, which he dignified by calling it a scheme of geo-

graphical discovery; for he was inordinately anxious to make a name for himself in that field. It was the one passion that was stronger than his mistrust of me. Before going away he sat down with me in this room, and read me a lecture, which resulted in a very rash offer on my part. When I tell it to you, you will find that it provides a key to all that is unusual in my life here. He bade me consider what my position would be when he was gone; hoped that I should remember what was due to him,—that I would not so behave towards other men as to bring the name of Constantine into suspicion; and charged me to avoid levity of conduct in attending any ball, rout, or dinner to which I might be invited. I, in some indignation at his low opinion of me, responded perhaps too spiritedly. I volunteered, there and then, to live like a cloistered nun during his absence; to go

into no society whatever,—not even to a neighbour's dinner-party; and demanded bitterly if that would satisfy him. He said yes, instantly held me to my word, and gave me no loophole for retracting it. The inevitable fruits of precipitancy have resulted to me: my life has become a burden. I get such invitations as these," (holding up the cards), "but I so invariably refuse them that they are getting very rare. . . . I ask you, can I honestly break that promise to my husband?"

Mr. Torkingham seemed embarrassed. "If you promised Sir Blount Constantine to live in solitude till he comes back, you are, it seems to me, bound by that promise. I fear that the wish to be released from your engagement is to some extent a reason why it should be kept. But your own conscience would surely be the best guide, Lady Constantine?"

"My conscience is quite bewildered with its responsibilities," she continued, with a sigh. "Yet it certainly does sometimes say to me that—that I ought to keep my word. Very well; I must go on as I am going, I suppose."

"If you respect a vow, I think you must respect your own," said the parson, acquiring some further firmness. "Had it been wrung from you by compulsion, moral or physical, it would have been open to you to break it. But as you proposed a vow when your husband only required a good intention, I think you ought to adhere to it; or what is the pride worth that led you to offer it?"

"Very well," she said, with resignation. "But it was quite a work of supererogation on my part."

"That you proposed it in a supererogatory spirit does not lessen your obligation,

having once put yourself under that obligation. St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Hebrews, says, 'An oath for confirmation is an end of all strife.' And you will readily recall the words of Ecclesiastes, 'Pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.' Why not write to Sir Blount, tell him the inconvenience of such a bond, and ask him to release you?"

"No; never will I. The expression of such a desire would, in his mind, be a sufficient reason for disallowing it. I'll keep my word."

Mr. Torkingham rose to leave. After she had held out her hand to him, when he had crossed the room, and was within two steps of the door, she said, "Mr. Torkingham." He stopped. "What I have told you is only the least part of what I sent for you to tell you."

Mr. Torkingham walked back to her side. "What is it, then?" he asked, with grave surprise.

"It is a true revelation, as far as it goes; but there is something more. I have received this letter, and I wanted to say—something."

"Then say it now, my dear lady."

"No," she answered, with a look of utter inability. "I cannot speak of it now! Some other time. Don't stay. Please consider this conversation as private. Good-night."

CHAPTER IV.

It was a bright starlight night, a week or ten days later. There had been several such nights since the occasion of Lady Constantine's promise to Swithin St. Cleeve to come and study astronomical phenomena on the Rings-Hill column ; but she had not gone there. This evening she sat at a window, the blind of which had not been drawn down. Her elbow rested on a little table, and her cheek on her hand. Her eyes were attracted by the brightness of the planet Jupiter, as he rode in the ecliptic opposite, beaming down upon her as if desirous of notice.

Beneath the planet could be still discerned the dark edges of the park landscape against the sky. As one of its features, though nearly screened by the trees which had been planted to shut out the fallow tracts of the estate, rose the upper part of the column. It was hardly visible now, even if visible at all; yet Lady Constantine knew from daytime experience its exact bearing from the window at which she leaned. The knowledge that there it still was, despite its rapid envelopment by the shades, led her lonely mind to her late meeting on its summit with the young astronomer, and to her promise to honour him with a visit for learning some secrets about the scintillating bodies overhead. The curious juxtaposition of youthful ardour and old despair that she had found in the lad would have made him interesting to a woman of perception, apart from his fair hair and

early-Christian face. But such is the heightening touch of memory that his beauty was probably richer in her imagination than in the real. It was a moot point to consider whether the temptations that would be brought to bear upon him in his course would exceed the staying power of his nature. Had he been a rich youth, he would have seemed one to tremble for. In spite of his attractive ambitions and gentlemanly bearing, she thought it would possibly be better for him if he never became known outside his lonely tower,—forgetting that he had received such intellectual enlargement as would probably make his continuance in Welland seem, in his own eye, a slight upon his father's branch of his family, whose social standing had been, only a few years earlier, but little removed from her own.

Suddenly she flung a cloak about her

and went out on the terrace. An altogether new idea plainly possessed her. She passed down the steps to the lower lawn, through the door to the open park, and there stood still. The tower was now discernible. As the words in which a thought is expressed develop a further thought, so did the fact of her having got so far influence her to go further. A person who had casually observed her gait would have thought it irregular; and the lessenings and increasings of speed with which she proceeded in the direction of the pillar could be accounted for only by a motive much more disturbing than an intention to look through a telescope. Thus she went on, till, leaving the park, she crossed the turnpike-road, and entered the large field, in the middle of which the fir-clad hill stood stood like Mont St. Michel in its bay.

The stars were so bright as distinctly to

show her the place, and now she could see a faint light at the top of the column, which rose like a shadowy finger pointing to the upper constellations. There was no wind, in a human sense; but a steady stertorous breathing from the fir-trees showed that, now as always, there was movement in apparent stagnation. Nothing but an absolute vacuum could paralyze their utterance.

The door of the tower was shut. It was something more than the freakishness which is engendered by a sickening monotony that had led Lady Constantine thus far, and hence she made no ado about admitting herself. Three years ago, when her every action was a thing of propriety, she had known of no possible purpose which could have led her abroad in a manner such as this.

She ascended the tower noiselessly. On

raising her head above the hatchway she beheld Swithin bending over a scroll of paper which lay on the little table beside him. The small lantern that illuminated it showed also that he was warmly wrapped up in a coat and thick cap, behind him standing the telescope on its frame.

What was he doing? She looked over his shoulder upon the paper, and saw figures and signs. When he had jotted down something, he went to the telescope again.

"What are you doing to-night?" she said in a low voice.

Swithin started, and turned. The faint lamp-light was sufficient to reveal her face to him.

"Tedious work, Lady Constantine," he answered, without betraying much surprise. "Doing my best to watch phenomenal stars, as I may call them."

"You said you would show me the heavens, if I could come on a starlight night. I have come."

Swithin, as a preliminary, swept round the telescope to Jupiter, and exhibited to her the glory of that orb. Then he directed the instrument to the less bright shape of Saturn.

"Here," he said, warming up to the subject, "we see a world which is to my mind by far the most wonderful in the solar system. Think of streams of satellites or meteors racing round and round the planet like a fly-wheel, so close together as to seem solid matter!" He entered further and further into the subject, his ideas gathering momentum as he went on, like his pet heavenly bodies.

When he paused for breath, she said, in tones very different from his own, "I ought now to tell you that, though I am

interested in the stars, they were not what I came to see you about. They were only an excuse for coming. I first thought of disclosing the matter to Mr. Torkingham; but I altered my mind, and decided on you."

She spoke in so low a voice that he might not have heard her. At all events, abstracted by his grand theme, he did not heed her. He continued,—

"Well, we will get outside the solar system altogether,—leave the whole group of sun, primary and secondary planets quite behind us in our flight, as a bird might leave its bush and sweep into the whole forest. Now what do you see, Lady Constantine?" He levelled the achromatic at Sirius.

She said that she saw a bright star, though it only seemed a point of light now as before.

"That's because it is so distant that no magnifying will bring its size up to zero. Though called a fixed star, it is, like all fixed stars, moving with inconceivable velocity; but no magnifying will show that velocity as anything but rest."

And thus they talked on about Sirius, and then about other stars

> . . . in the scrowl
> Of all those beasts, and fish, and fowl,
> With which, like Indian plantations,
> The learned stock the constellations,

till he asked her how many stars she thought were visible to them at that moment.

She looked around over the magnificent stretch of sky that their high position unfolded. "Oh, thousands,—hundreds of thousands," she said absently.

"No. There are only about three thousand. Now, how many do you think

are brought within sight by the help of a powerful telescope?"

"I won't guess."

"Twenty millions. So that, whatever the stars were made for, they were not made to please our eyes. It is just the same in everything; nothing is made for man."

"Is it that notion which makes you so sad for your age?" she asked, with almost maternal solicitude. "I think astronomy is a bad study for you. It makes you feel human insignificance too plainly."

"Perhaps it does. However," he added more cheerfully, "though I feel the study to be one almost tragic in its quality, I hope to be the new Copernicus. What he was to the solar system I aim to be to the systems beyond."

Then, by means of the instrument at hand, they travelled together from the

earth to Uranus and the mysterious outskirts of the solar system; from the solar system to a star in the Swan, the nearest fixed star in the northern sky; from the star in the Swan to remoter stars; thence to the remotest visible; till the ghastly chasm which they had bridged by a fragile line of sight was realized by Lady Constantine.

"We are now traversing distances beside which the immense line stretching from the earth to the sun is but an invisible point," said the youth. "When, just now, we had reached a planet whose remoteness is a hundred times the remoteness of the sun from the earth, we were only a two thousandth part of the journey to the spot at which we have optically arrived now."

"Oh, pray don't; it overpowers me!" she replied, not without seriousness. "It

makes me feel that it is not worth while to live; it quite annihilates me."

"If it annihilates your ladyship to roam over these yawning spaces just once, think how it must annihilate me to be, as it were, in constant suspension amid them night after night."

"Yes. It was not really this subject that I came to see you upon, Mr. St. Cleeve," she began a second time. "It was a personal matter."

"I am listening, Lady Constantine."

"I will tell it you. Yet no,—not this moment. Let us finish this grand subject first; it dwarfs mine."

It would have been difficult to judge from her accents whether she were afraid to broach her own matter, or really interested in his. Or a certain youthful pride that he evidenced at being the elucidator of such a large theme, and at having

drawn her there to hear and observe it, may have inclined her to indulge him for kindness' sake.

Thereupon he took exception to her use of the word "grand" as descriptive of the actual universe:

"The imaginary picture of the sky as the concavity of a dome whose base extends from horizon to horizon of our earth is grand, simply grand, and I wish I had never got beyond looking at it in that way. But the actual sky is a horror."

"A new view of our old friends, the stars," she said, smiling up at them.

"But such an obviously true one!" said the young man. "You would hardly think, at first, that horrid monsters lie up there waiting to be discovered by any moderately penetrating mind,—monsters to which those of the oceans bear no sort of comparison."

"What monsters may they be?"

"Impersonal monsters, namely, Immensities. Until a person has thought out the stars and their interspaces, he has hardly learnt that there are things much more terrible than monsters of shape, namely, monsters of magnitude without known shape. Such monsters are the voids and waste places of the sky. Look, for instance, at those pieces of darkness in the Milky Way," he went on, pointing with his finger to where the galaxy stretched across over their heads with the luminousness of a frosted web. "You see that dark opening in it near the Swan? There is a still more remarkable one south of the equator, called the Coal Sack, as a sort of nickname that has a farcical force from its very inadequacy. In these our sight plunges quite beyond any twinkler we have yet visited. Those are deep wells for the

human mind to let itself down into, leave alone the human body! and think of the side caverns and secondary abysses to right and left as you pass on!"

Lady Constantine was heedful and silent.

He tried to give her yet another idea of the size of the universe; never was there a more ardent endeavour to bring down the immeasurable to human comprehension! By figures of speech and apt comparisons he took her mind into leading-strings, compelling her to follow him into wildernesses of which she had never in her life even realized the existence.

"There is a size at which dignity begins," he exclaimed; "further on there is a size at which grandeur begins; further on there is a size at which solemnity begins; further on, a size at which awfulness begins; further on, a size at which ghastliness

begins. That size faintly approaches the size of the stellar universe. So am I not right in saying that those minds who exert their imaginative powers to bury themselves in the depths of that universe merely strain their faculties to gain a new horror?"

Standing, as she stood, in the presence of the stellar universe, under the very eyes of the constellations, Lady Constantine apprehended something of the earnest youth's argument.

"And to add a new weirdness to what the sky possesses in its size and formlessness, there is involved the quality of decay. For all the wonder of these everlasting stars, eternal spheres, and what not, they are not everlasting, they are not eternal; they burn out like candles. You see that dying one in the body of the Greater Bear? Two centuries ago it was as bright as the

others. The senses may become terrified by plunging among them as they are, but there is a pitifulness even in their glory. Imagine them all extinguished, and your mind feeling its way through a heaven of total darkness, occasionally striking against the black, invisible cinders of those stars. . . . . If you are cheerful, and wish to remain so, leave the study of astronomy alone. Of all the sciences, it alone deserves the character of the terrible."

"I am not altogether cheerful."

"Then if, on the other hand, you are restless and anxious about the future, study astronomy at once. Your troubles will be reduced amazingly. But your study will reduce them in a singular way, by reducing the importance of everything. So that the science is still terrible, even as a panacea. It is quite impossible to think at all adequately of the sky—of what the sky sub-

stantially is, without feeling it as a juxtaposed nightmare. It is better—far better—for men to forget the universe than to bear it clearly in mind! . . . But you say the universe was not really what you came to see me about. What was it, may I ask, Lady Constantine?"

She mused, and sighed, and turned to him with something pathetic in her.

"The immensity of the subject you have engaged me on has completely crushed my subject out of me! Yours is celestial; mine lamentably human! And the less must give way to the greater."

"But is it, in a human sense, and apart from macrocosmic magnitudes, important?" he inquired, at last attracted by her manner; for he began to perceive, in spite of his prepossession, that she had really something on her mind.

"It is as important as personal troubles usually are."

Notwithstanding her preconceived notion of coming to Swithin as employer to dependent, as *châtelaine* to page, she was falling into confidential intercourse with him. His vast and romantic endeavours lent him a personal force and charm which she could not but apprehend. In the presence of the immensities that his young mind had, as it were, brought down from above to hers, they became unconsciously equal. There was, moreover, an inborn liking in Lady Constantine to dwell less on her permanent position as a county lady than on her passing emotions as a woman.

"I will postpone the matter I came to charge you with," she resumed, smiling. "I must reconsider it. Now I will return."

"Allow me to show you out through the trees and across the fields?"

She said neither a distinct yes nor no; and, descending the tower, they threaded the firs and crossed the ploughed field. By an odd coincidence he remarked, when they drew near the Great House,—

"You may possibly be interested in knowing, Lady Constantine, that that medium-sized star you see over there, low down in the south, is precisely over Sir Blount Constantine's head in the middle of Africa."

"How very strange that you should have said so!" she answered. "You have broached for me the very subject I had come to speak of."

"On a domestic matter?" he said, with surprise.

"Yes. What a small matter it seems now, after our astronomical stupendous-

ness! and yet on my way to you it so far transcended the ordinary matters of my life as the subject you have led me up to transcends this. But," with a little laugh, "I will endeavour to sink down to such ephemeral trivialities as human tragedy, and explain, since I have come. The point is, I want a helper: no woman ever wanted one more. For days I have wanted a trusty friend who could go on a secret errand for me. It is necessary that my messenger should be educated, should be intelligent, should be silent as the grave. Do you give me your solemn promise as to the last point, if I confide in you?"

"Most emphatically, Lady Constantine."

"Your right hand upon the compact."

He gave his hand, and raised hers to his lips. In addition to his respect for her as the lady of the manor, there was the ad-

miration of twenty years for twenty-eight or nine in such relations.

"I trust you," she said. "Now, beyond the above conditions, it was specially necessary that my agent should have known Sir Blount Constantine well by sight when he was at home. For the errand is concerning my husband; I am much disturbed at what I have heard about him."

"I am indeed sorry to know it."

"There are only two people in the parish who fulfil all the conditions,—Mr. Torkingham, and yourself. I sent for Mr. Torkingham, and he came. I could not tell him. I felt at the last moment that he wouldn't do. I have come to you because I think you will do. This is it: my husband has led me and all the world to believe that he is in Africa, hunting lions. I have had a mysterious letter informing me that he has been seen in London, in

very peculiar circumstances. The truth of this I want ascertained. Will you go on the journey?"

"Personally, I would go to the end of the world for you, Lady Constantine; but"—

"No buts!"

"How can I leave?"

"Why not?"

"I am preparing a work on variable stars. There is one of these which I have exceptionally observed for several months, and on this my great theory is mainly based. It has been hitherto called irregular; but I have detected a periodicity in its so-called irregularities which, if proved, would add some very valuable facts to those known on this subject, one of the most interesting, perplexing, and suggestive in the whole field of astronomy. Now, to clinch my theory, there should be a

sudden variation this week,—or at latest next week,—and I have to watch every night not to let it pass. You see my reason for declining, Lady Constantine."

"Young men are always so selfish!" she said.

"It might ruin the whole of my year's labour if I leave now!" returned the youth, greatly hurt. "Could you not wait a fortnight longer?"

"No,—no. Don't think that I have asked you, pray. I have no wish to inconvenience yon."

"Lady Constantine, don't be angry with me! Will you do this,—watch the star for me while I am gone? If you are prepared to do it effectually, I will go."

"Will it be much trouble?"

"It will be some trouble. You would have to come here every clear evening about nine. If the sky were not clear,

then you would have to come at four in the morning, should the clouds have dispersed."

"Could not the telescope be brought to my house?"

Swithin shook his head.

"Perhaps you did not observe its real size,—that it was fixed to a frame-work? I could not afford to buy an equatorial, and I have been obliged to rig up an apparatus of my own devising, so as to make it in some measure answer the purpose of an equatorial. It *could* be moved, but I would rather not touch it."

"Well, I'll go to the telescope," she went on, with an emphasis that was not wholly playful. "You are the most ungallant youth I ever met with; but I suppose I must set that down to science. Yes, I'll go to the tower at nine every night."

"And alone? I should prefer to keep my pursuits there unknown."

"And alone," she answered, quite overborne by his inflexibility.

"You will not miss the morning observation, if it should be necessary?"

"I have given my word."

"And I give mine. I suppose I ought not to have been so exacting!" He spoke with that sudden emotional consciousness of his own transitoriness which made these alternations of mood possible. "I will go anywhere—do anything for you—this moment—to-morrow or at any time. But you must return with me to the tower, and let me show you the observing process."

They retraced their steps, the tender hoar-frost taking the imprint of their feet, and two stars in the Twins looking down upon their two persons through the trees,

as if those two persons could bear some sort of comparison with them. On the tower the instructions were given. When all was over, and he was again conducting her to the Great House, she said,—

"When can you start?"

"Now," said Swithin.

"So much the better. You shall go up by the night mail."

CHAPTER V.

On the third morning after the young man's departure Lady Constantine opened the post-bag anxiously. Though she had risen before four o'clock, and crossed to the tower through the gray half-light, when every blade and twig was furred with rime, she felt no languor. Expectation could banish at cock-crow the eye-heaviness which apathy had been unable to disperse all the day long.

There was, as she had hoped, a letter from Swithin St. Cleeve.

"Dear Lady Constantine,—I have quite

succeeded in my mission, and shall return to-morrow at ten p.m. I hope you have not failed in the observations. Watching the star through an opera-glass Sunday night, I fancied some change had taken place, but I could not make myself sure. Your memoranda for that night I await with impatience. Please don't neglect to write down, *at the moment*, all remarkable appearances both as to colour and intensity; and be very exact as to time, which correct in the way I showed you.

"I am, dear Lady Constantine,

"Yours most faithfully,

"SWITHIN ST. CLEEVE."

Not another word in the letter about his errand; his mind ran on nothing but this astronomical subject. He had succeeded in his mission, and yet he did not even say yes or no to the great question,—whether

or not her husband was masquerading in London at the address she had given.

"Was ever anything so provoking!" she cried.

However, the time was not long to wait. His way homeward would lie within a stone's-throw of the manor-house, and though for certain reasons she had forbidden him to call at the late hour of his arrival, she could easily intercept him in the avenue. At twenty minutes past ten she went out into the drive, and stood in the dark. Seven minutes later she heard his footstep, and saw his outline in the slit of light between the avenue-trees. He had a valise in one hand, a great-coat on his arm, and under his arm a parcel which seemed to be very precious, from the manner in which he held it.

"Lady Constantine?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she said, in her excitement hold-

ing out both her hands, though he had plainly not expected her to offer one.

"Did you watch the star?"

"I'll tell you everything in detail; but, pray, your errand first!"

"Yes, it's all right. Did you watch every night,—not missing one?"

"I forgot to go—twice," she murmured contritely.

"Oh, Lady Constantine!" he cried in dismay. "How *could* you serve me so! what shall I do?"

"Please forgive me! Indeed, I could not help it. I had watched and watched, and nothing happened; and somehow my vigilance relaxed when I found nothing was likely to take place in the star."

"But the very circumstance of it not having happened, made it all the more likely every day."

"Have you—seen—" she began imploringly.

Swithin sighed, lowered his thoughts to sublunary things, and told briefly the story of his journey. Sir Blount Constantine was not in London at the address which had been anonymously sent her. It was a mistake of identity. The person who had been seen there Swithin had sought out. He resembled Sir Blount strongly; but he was a stranger.

"How can I reward you!" she exclaimed, when he had done.

"In no way but by giving me your good wishes in what I am going to tell you on my own account." He spoke in tones of mysterious exultation. "This parcel is going to make my fame!"

"What is it?"

"A huge object-glass for the great telescope I am so busy about! Such a magnificent aid to science has never entered this county before, you may depend."

He produced from under his arm the

carefully cuddled-up package, which was in shape a round flat disk, like a dinner-plate, tied in paper.

Proceeding to explain his plans to her more fully, he walked with her towards the door by which she had emerged. It was a little side wicket through a wall dividing the open park from the garden terraces. Here for a moment he placed his valise and parcel on the coping of the stone balustrade, till he had bidden her farewell. Then he turned, and in laying hold of his bag by the dim light pushed the parcel over the parapet. It fell smash upon the paved walk ten or a dozen feet beneath.

"Oh, good heavens!" he cried in anguish.

"What?"

"My object-glass broken!"

"Is it of much value?"

"It cost all I possess!"

He ran round by the steps to the lower lawn, Lady Constantine following, as he continued, "It is a magnificent eight-inch first quality object lens! I took advantage of my journey to London to get it! I have been six weeks making the tube of milled board; and as I had not enough money by twelve pounds for the lens, I borrowed it of my grandmother out of her last annuity payment. What can be, can be done!"

"Perhaps it is not broken."

He felt on the ground, found the parcel, and shook it. A clicking noise issued from inside. Swithin smote his forehead with his hand, and walked up and down like a mad fellow.

"My telescope! I have waited nine months for this lens. Now the possibility of setting up a really powerful instrument

is over! It is too cruel—how could it happen! . . . Lady Constantine, I am ashamed of myself,—before you. Oh, but, Lady Constantine, if you only knew what it is to a person engaged in science to have the means of clinching a theory snatched away at the last moment! It is I against the world; and when the world has accidents on its side in addition to its natural strength, what chance for me!"

The young astronomer leant against the wall, and was silent. His misery was of an intensity and kind with that of Palissy, in these struggles with an adverse fate.

"Don't mind it,—pray don't!" said Lady Constantine, with deep feeling. "It is dreadfully unfortunate! You have my whole sympathy. Can it be mended?"

"Mended,—no, no!"

"Cannot you do with your present one a little longer?"

"It is altogether inferior, cheap, and bad!"

"I'll get you another,—yes, indeed, I will! Allow me to get you another as soon as possible. I'll do anything to assist you out of your trouble; for I am most anxious to see you famous. I know you will be a great astronomer, in spite of this mishap! Come, say I may get a new one."

Swithin took her hand. He could not trust himself to speak.

Some days later a little box of peculiar kind came to the Great House. It was addressed to Lady Constantine, "with great care." She had it partly opened and taken to her own little writing-room; and after lunch, when she had dressed for walking, she took from the box a paper parcel like the one which had met with the

accident. This she hid under her mantle, as if she had stolen it; and, going out slowly across the lawn, passed through the little door before spoken of, and was soon hastening in the direction of the Rings-Hill column.

There was a bright sun overhead on that afternoon of early spring, and its rays shed an unusual warmth on south-west aspects, though shady places still retained the look and feel of winter. Rooks were already beginning to build new nests or to mend up old ones, and clamorously called in neighbours to give opinions on difficulties in their architecture. Lady Constantine swerved once from her path, as if she had decided to go to the homestead where Swithin lived; but on second thoughts she bent her steps to the column.

Drawing near it, she looked up; but on account of the height of the parapet, no-

body could be seen thereon who did not stand on tiptoe. She thought, however, that her young friend might possibly see her, if he were there, and come down; and that he was there she soon ascertained by finding the door unlocked, and the key inside. No movement, however, reached her ears from above, and she began to ascend.

Meanwhile affairs at the top of the column had progressed as follows. The afternoon being exceptionally fine, Swithin had ascended about two o'clock, and, seating himself at the little table which he had constructed on the spot, he began reading over his notes and examining some astronomical journals that had reached him in the morning. The sun blazed into the hollow roof-space as into a tub, and the sides kept out every breeze. Though the month was February below, it was May in

the abacus of the column. This state of the atmosphere, and the fact that on the previous night he had pursued his observations till past two o'clock, produced in him at the end of half an hour an overpowering inclination to sleep. Spreading on the lead-work a thick rug, which he kept up there, he flung himself down against the parapet, and was soon in a state of unconsciousness.

It was about ten minutes afterwards that a soft rustle of silken clothes came up the spiral staircase, and, hesitating onwards, reached the orifice, where appeared the form of Lady Constantine. She did not at first perceive that he was present, and stood still to reconnoitre. Her eye glanced over his telescope, now wrapped up, his table and papers, his observing-chair, and his contrivances for making the best of a deficiency of instruments. All was warm, sunny,

and silent, except that a solitary bee, which had somehow got within the hollow of the abacus, was singing round inquiringly, unable to discern that ascent was the only mode of escape. In another moment she beheld the astronomer, lying in the sun like a sailor in the main-top.

Lady Constantine coughed slightly; he did not awake. She then entered, and, drawing the parcel from beneath her cloak, placed it on the table. After this she waited, looking for a long time at his sleeping face, which had a very interesting appearance. She seemed reluctant to leave, yet wanted resolution to wake him; and, pencilling his name on the parcel, she withdrew to the staircase, where the brushing of her dress decreased to silence as she receded round and round on her way to the base.

Swithin still slept on, and presently the

rustle began again in the far-down interior of the column. The door could be heard closing, and the rustle came nearer, showing that she had shut herself in,—no doubt to lessen the risk of an accidental surprise by any roaming villager. When Lady Constantine reappeared at the top, and saw the parcel still untouched, and Swithin asleep as before, she exhibited some disappointment; but she did not retreat.

Looking again at him, her eyes became so sentimentally fixed on his face that it seemed as if she could not withdraw them. There lay, in the shape of an Antinous, no *amoroso*, no gallant, but a guileless philosopher. His parted lips were lips which spoke, not of love, but of millions of miles; those were eyes which habitually gazed, not into the depths of other eyes, but into other worlds. Within his temples dwelt thoughts, not of woman's looks, but

of stellar aspects and the configuration of constellations.

Thus, to his physical attractiveness was added the attractiveness of mental inaccessibility. The ennobling influence of scientific pursuits was demonstrated by the speculative purity which expressed itself in his eyes whenever he looked at her in speaking, and in the childlike faults of manner which arose from his obtuseness to their difference of sex. He had never, since becoming a man, looked even so low as to the level of a Lady Constantine. His heaven at present was truly in the skies, and not in that only other place where they say it can be found, in the eyes of some daughter of Eve. Would any Circe or Calypso—and if so, what one?—ever check this pale-haired scientist's nocturnal sailings into the interminable spaces overhead, and hurl all his mighty

calculations on cosmic force and stellar fire into Limbo? Oh, the pity of it, if such should be the case!

She became much absorbed in these very womanly reflections; and at last Lady Constantine sighed, perhaps she herself did not exactly know why. Then a very soft expression lighted on her lips and eyes, and she looked at one jump seven years more youthful than before—quite a girl in aspect, younger than he. On the table lay his implements; among them a pair of scissors, which, to judge from the shreds around, had been used in cutting curves in thick paper, for some calculating process.

What whim, agitation, or attraction prompted the impulse, nobody knows; but she took the scissors, and, bending over the sleeping youth, cut off one of the curls, or rather crooks,—for they hardly reached a curl,—into which each lock of his hair

chose to twist itself in the last inch of its length. The hair fell upon the rug. She picked it up quickly, returned the scissors to the table, and, as if her dignity had suddenly become ashamed of her fantasies, hastened through the door, and descended the staircase.

CHAPTER VI.

When his nap had naturally exhausted itself, Swithin awoke. He awoke without any surprise, for he not unfrequently gave to sleep in the day-time what he had stolen from it in the night watches. The first object that met his eyes was the parcel on the table, and, seeing his name inscribed thereon, he made no scruple to open it.

The sun flashed upon a lens of surprising magnitude, polished to such a smoothness that the eye could scarcely meet its reflections. Here was a crystal, in whose depths were to be seen more wonders than had been revealed by the crystals of all the Cagliostros.

Swithin, hot with joyousness, took this treasure to his telescope manufactory at the homestead; then he started off for the Great House.

On gaining its precincts he felt shy of calling, never having received any hint or permission to do so; while Lady Constantine's mysterious manner of leaving the parcel seemed to demand a like mysteriousness in his approaches to her. All the afternoon he lingered about uncertainly, in the hope of intercepting her on her return from a drive, occasionally walking with an indifferent lounge across glades commanded by the windows, that if she were in-doors she might know he was near. But she did not show herself during the daylight. Still impressed by her playful secrecy, he carried on the same idea after dark, by returning to the house, and passing through the garden door on to the lawn front, where

he sat on the parapet that breasted the terrace.

Now she frequently came out here for a melancholy saunter after dinner, and to-night was such an occasion. Swithin went forward, and met her at nearly the spot where he had dropped the lens some nights earlier.

"I have come to see you, Lady Constantine. How did the glass get on my table?"

She laughed as lightly as a girl; that he had come to her in this way was plainly no offence thus far.

"Perhaps it was dropped from the clouds by a bird," she said.

"Why should you be so good to me?" he cried.

"One good turn deserves another," answered she.

"Dear Lady Constantine! Whatever

discoveries result from this shall be ascribed to you as much as to me. Where should I have been without your gift?"

"You would possibly have accomplished your purpose just the same, and have been so much the nobler for your struggle against ill-luck. I hope that now you will be able to proceed with your large telescope as if nothing had happened."

"Oh yes, I will, certainly. I am afraid I showed too much feeling, the reverse of stoical, when the accident occurred. That was not very noble of me."

"There is nothing unnatural in such feeling at your age. When you are older you will smile at such moods, and at the mishaps that gave rise to them."

"Ah, I perceive you think me weak in the extreme," he said, with just a shade of pique. "But you will never realize that an incident which filled but a degree in the

circle of your thoughts covered the whole circumference of mine. No person can see exactly what and where another's horizon is."

They soon parted, and she re-entered the house, where she sat reflecting for some time, till she seemed to fear that she had wounded his feelings. She awoke in the night, and thought and thought on the same thing, till she had worked herself into a feverish fret about it. When it was morning she looked across at the tower, and sitting down, impulsively wrote the following note:—

"Dear Mr. St. Cleeve,—I cannot allow you to remain under the impression that I despised your scientific endeavours in speaking as I did last night. I think you were too sensitive to my remark. But perhaps you were agitated with the labours

of the day, and I fear that watching so late at night must make you very weary. If I can help you again, please let me know. I never realized the grandeur of astronomy till you showed me how to do so. Also let me know about the new telescope. Come and see me at any time. After your great kindness in being my messenger I can never do enough for you. I wish you had a mother or sister, and pity your loneliness! I am lonely too.

"Yours truly,

"VIVIETTE CONSTANTINE."

She was so anxious that he should get this letter the same day that she ran across to the column with it during the morning, preferring to be her own emissary in so curious a case. The door, as she had expected, was locked; and, slipping the letter under it, she went home again.

During lunch her ardour in the cause of Swithin's hurt feelings cooled down, till she exclaimed to herself, as she sat at her lonely table, "What could have possessed me to write in that way!"

After lunch she went faster to the tower than she had gone in the early morning, and peeped eagerly into the chink under the door. She could discern no letter, and, on trying the latch, found that the door would open. The letter was gone, Swithin having obviously arrived in the interval.

She blushed a blush which seemed to say, "I am getting foolishly interested in this young man." She had, in short, in her own opinion, somewhat overstepped the bounds of dignity. Her instincts did not square well with the formalities of her existence, and she walked home despondently.

Had a concert, bazaar, lecture, or Dorcas meeting required the patronage and support of Lady Constantine at this juncture, the circumstance would probably have been sufficient to divert her mind from Swithin St. Cleeve and astronomy for some little time. But as none of these incidents were within the range of expectation—Welland House and parish lying far from towns and watering-places —the void in her outer life continued, and with it the void in her life within.

The youth had not answered her letter; neither had he called upon her, in response to the invitation she had regretted, with the rest of the epistle, as being somewhat too warmly informal for black and white. To speak tenderly to him was one thing, to write another—that was her feeling immediately after the event; but his counter-move of silence and avoidance,

though probably the result of pure unconsciousness on his part, completely dispersed such self-considerations now. Her eyes never fell upon the Rings-Hill column without a solicitous wonder arising as to what he was doing. A true woman, she would assume the remotest possibility to be the most likely contingency, if the possibility had the recommendation of being tragical; and she now feared that something was wrong with Swithin St. Cleeve. Yet there was not the least doubt that he had become so immersed in the business of the new telescope as to forget everything else.

On Sunday, between the services, she walked to Little Welland, chiefly for the sake of giving a run to a house-dog, a large St. Bernard, of whom she was fond. The distance was but short; and she returned along a narrow lane, divided

from the river by a hedge, through whose leafless twigs the ripples flashed silver lights into her eyes. Here she discovered Swithin, leaning over a gate, his eyes bent upon the stream.

The dog first attracted his attention; then he heard her, and turned round. She had never seen him looking so despondent.

"You have never called, though I invited you," said Lady Constantine.

"My great telescope won't work!" he replied lugubriously.

"I am sorry for that. So it has made you quite forget me?"

"Ah, yes; you wrote me a very kind letter, which I ought to have answered. Well, I *did* forget, Lady Constantine. My new telescope won't work; and I don't know what to do about it at all!"

"Can I assist you any further?"

"No, I fear not. Besides, you have assisted me already."

"What would really help you out of all your difficulties? Something would, surely?"

He shook his head.

"There must be some solution to them?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, with a hypothetical gaze into the stream; "*some* solution of course—an equatorial, for instance."

"What's that?"

"Briefly, an impossibility. It is a splendid instrument, with an object lens of, say, eight or nine inches aperture, mounted with its axis parallel to the earth's axis, and fitted up with graduated circles for denoting right ascensions and declinations; besides having special eyepieces, a finder, and all sorts of appliances,

clock-work to make the telescope follow the motion in right ascension—I cannot tell you half the conveniences. Ah, an equatorial is a thing indeed!"

"An equatorial is the one instrument required to make you quite happy?"

"Well, yes."

"I'll see what I can do."

"But, Lady Constantine," cried the amazed astronomer, "an equatorial such as I describe costs as much as two grand pianos!"

She was rather staggered at this news; but she rallied gallantly, and said, "Never mind. I'll make inquiries."

"But it could not be put on the tower without people seeing it! It would have to be fixed to the masonry. And there must be a dome of some kind to keep off the rain. A tarpaulin might do."

Lady Constantine reflected. "It would

be a great business, I see," she said. "Though as far as the fixing and roofing go, I would of course consent to your doing what you liked with the old column. My workmen could fix it, could they not?"

"Oh, yes. But what would Sir Blount say, if he came home and saw the goings on?"

Lady Constantine turned aside to hide a sudden displacement of blood from her cheek. "Ah—my husband!" she whispered . . . . "I am just now going to church," she added in a repressed and hurried tone. "I will think of this matter."

In church it was with Lady Constantine as with the Lord Angelo of Vienna, in a similar situation—Heaven had her empty words only, and her invention heard not her tongue. She soon recovered from the momentary consternation into which she

had fallen at Swithin's abrupt query. The possibility of that young astronomer becoming a renowned scientist by her aid was a thought which gave her secret pleasure. The course of rendering him instant material help began to have a great fascination for her; it was a new and unexpected channel for her cribbed and confined emotions. With experiences so much wider than his, Lady Constantine saw that the chances were perhaps a million to one against Swithin St. Cleeve ever being Astronomer Royal, or Astronomer Extraordinary of any sort; yet the remaining chance in his favour was one of those possibilities which, to a woman of bounding intellect and venturesome fancy, are pleasanter to dwell on than likely issues that have no savour of high speculation in them. The equatorial question was a great one; and she had caught such

a large spark from his enthusiasm that she could think of nothing so piquant as how to obtain the important instrument.

When Tabitha Lark arrived at the Great House, next day, instead of finding Lady Constantine in bed, as formerly, she discovered her in the library, poring over what astronomical works she had been able to unearth from the worm-eaten shelves. As these publications were, for a science of such rapid development, somewhat venerable, there was not much help of a practical kind to be gained from them. Nevertheless, the equatorial retained a hold upon her fancy, till she became as eager to see one on the Rings-Hill column as Swithin himself.

The upshot of it was that Lady Constantine sent a messenger that evening to Welland Bottom, where the homestead of Swithin's grandmother was situated, re-

questing the young man's presence at the house at twelve o'clock next day.

He hurriedly returned an obedient reply, and the circumstance was enough to lend great freshness to her manner next morning, instead of the leaden air which was too frequent with her before the sun reached the meridian, and sometimes after. The mental room taken up by an idea depends as largely on the available space for it as on its essential magnitude: in Lady Constantine's life of infestivity, in her domestic voids, and in her social discouragements, there was nothing to oust the lightest fancy. Swithin had, in fact, arisen as an attractive little interpolation between herself and despair.

CHAPTER VII.

A FOG defaced all the trees of the park that morning; the white atmosphere adhered to the ground like a fungoid growth from it, and made the turfed undulations look slimy and raw. But Lady Constantine settled down in her chair to await the coming of the late curate's son, with a serenity which the vast blanks outside could neither baffle nor destroy.

At two minutes to twelve the door-bell rang, and a look overspread the lady's face that was neither maternal, sisterly, nor amorous; but partook in an indescribable manner of all three. The door was

flung open and the young man was ushered in, the fog still clinging to his hair, in which she could discern a little notch where she had nipped off the curl.

A speechlessness that socially was a defect in him, was to her view a piquant attribute just now. He looked somewhat alarmed. "Lady Constantine, have I done anything, that you have sent,"—he began breathlessly, as he gazed in her face, with parted lips.

"Oh, no, of course not! I have decided to do something,—nothing more," she smilingly said, holding out her hand, which he rather gingerly touched. "Don't look so concerned. Who makes equatorials?"

This remark was like the drawing of a weir-hatch, and she was speedily inundated with all she wished to know concerning astronomical opticians. When he had imparted the particulars, he waited, manifestly

burning to know whither these inquiries tended.

"I am not going to buy you one," she said gently.

He looked as if he would faint.

"Certainly not. I do not wish it. I—could not have accepted it," faltered the young man.

"But I am going to buy one for *myself*. I lack a hobby, and I shall choose astronomy. I shall fix my equatorial on the column."

Swithin brightened up.

"And I shall let you have the use of it whenever you choose. In brief, Swithin St. Cleeve shall be Lady Constantine's Astronomer Royal; and she—and she—"

"Shall be his Queen." The words came not much the worse for being uttered only in the tone of one anxious to complete a tardy sentence.

"Well, that's what I have decided to do," resumed Lady Constantine. "I will write to these opticians at once."

There seemed to be no more for him to do than to thank her for the privilege, whenever it should be available, which he promptly did, and then made as if to go. But Lady Constantine detained him with, "Have you ever seen my library?"

"No; never."

"You don't say you would like to see it."

"But I should."

"It is the third door on the right. You can find your way in, and you can stay there as long as you like."

Swithin then left the morning-room for the apartment designated, and amused himself in that "soul of the house," as Cicero defined it, till he heard the lunch-bell sounding from the turret, when he

came down from the library steps, and thought it time to go home. But at that moment a servant entered to inquire whether he would or would not prefer to have his lunch brought in to him there; upon his replying in the affirmative, a large tray arrived on the stomach of a footman, and Swithin was greatly surprised to see a whole pheasant placed at his disposal.

Having breakfasted at eight that morning, and having been much in the open air afterwards, the Adonis astronomer's appetite assumed grand proportions. How much of that pheasant he might consistently eat without hurting his dear patroness Lady Constantine's feelings, when he could readily eat it all, was a problem in which the reasonableness of a larger and larger quantity argued itself inversely as a smaller and smaller quantity remained. When, at length, he had finally decided on a terminal

point in the body of the bird, the door was gently opened.

"Oh, you have not finished?" came to him over his shoulder, in a considerate voice.

"Oh, yes, thank you, Lady Constantine," he said, jumping up.

"Why did you prefer to lunch in this awkward, dusty place?"

"I thought—it would be better," said Swithin simply.

"There is fruit in the other room, if you like to come. But perhaps you would rather not?"

"Oh, yes, I should much like to," said Swithin, walking over his napkin, and following her as she led the way to the adjoining apartment.

Here, while she asked him what he had been reading, he modestly ventured on an apple, in whose flavour he recognized the

familiar taste of old friends robbed from her husband's orchards in his childhood, long before Lady Constantine's advent on the scene. (Is there anything more delightful in the world than to discover on the palate fruit of some long-lost venerable variety, that was the favourite of boyhood!) She supposed he had confined his search to his own sublime subject, astronomy?

Swithin suddenly became older to the eye, as his thoughts reverted to the topic thus reintroduced. "Yes," he informed her. "I seldom read any other subject. In these days the secret of productive study is to avoid well."

"Did you find any good treatises?"

"None. The theories in your books are almost as obsolete as the Ptolemaic System. Only fancy, that magnificent Cyclopædia, leather-bound, and stamped,

and gilt, and wide margined, and bearing the blazon of your house in magnificent colours, says that the twinkling of the stars is probably caused by heavenly bodies passing in front of them in their revolutions."

"And is it not so? That was what I learned when I was a girl."

The modern Eudoxus now rose above the embarrassing horizon of Lady Constantine's great house, magnificent furniture, and awe-inspiring footman. He became quite natural, all his self-consciousness fled, and his eye spoke into hers no less than his lips to her ears, as he said, "How such a theory can have lingered on to this day beats conjecture! François Arago, as long as forty or fifty years ago, conclusively established the fact that scintillation is the simplest thing in the world, —merely a matter of atmosphere. But I

won't speak of this to you now. The comparative absence of scintillation in warm countries was noticed by Humboldt. Then, again, the scintillations vary. No star flaps his wings like Sirius when he lies low! He flashes out emeralds and rubies, amethystine flames and sapphirine colours, in a manner quite marvellous to behold, and this is only *one* star! So, too, do Arcturus, and Capella, and lesser luminaries. . . . But I tire you with this subject?"

"On the contrary, you speak so beautifully that I could listen all day."

The astronomer threw a searching glance upon her for a moment; but there was no satire in the warm, soft eyes which met his own with a luxurious contemplative interest.

"Say some more of it to me," she continued, in a voice not far removed from coaxing.

After some hesitation the subject returned again to his lips, and he said some more—indeed, much more; Lady Constantine often throwing in an appreciative remark or question, often meditatively regarding him, in pursuance of ideas not exactly based on his words, and letting him go on as he would.

Before he left the house the new astronomical project was set in train. The top of the column was to be roofed in, to form a proper observatory; and on the ground that he knew better than any one else how this was to be carried out, she requested him to give precise directions on the point, and to superintend the whole. A wooden cabin was to be erected at the foot of the tower, to provide better accommodation for casual visitors to the observatory than the spiral staircase and lead-flat afforded. As this cabin would

be completely buried in the dense fir foliage which enveloped the lower part of the column and its pedestal, it would be no disfigurement to the general appearance. Finally, a path was to be made across the surrounding fallow, by which she might easily approach the scene of her new study.

When he was gone she wrote to the firm of opticians concerning the equatorial for whose reception all this was designed.

The undertaking was soon in full progress; and by degrees it became the talk of the hamlets round that Lady Constantine had given up melancholy for astronomy, to the great advantage of all who came in contact with her. One morning, when Tabitha Lark had come as usual to read, Lady Constantine chanced to be in a quarter of the house to which she seldom wandered; and while here she heard her

maid talking confidentially to Tabitha in the adjoining room on the curious and sudden interest which Lady Constantine had acquired in the moon and stars.

"They do say all sorts of trumpery," observed the handmaid. "They say—though 'tis little better than mischief, to be sure—that it isn't the moon, and it isn't the stars, and it isn't the plannards, that my lady cares for, but for the pretty lad who draws 'em down from the sky to please her; and being a married example, and what with sin and shame knocking at every poor maid's door afore you can say, 'Hands off, my dear,' to the civilest young man, she ought to set a better pattern."

Lady Constantine's face flamed up vividly.

"If Sir Blount were to come back all of a sudden—oh, my!"

Lady Constantine grew cold as ice.

"There's nothing in it," said Tabitha scornfully. "I could prove it any day."

"Well, I wish I had half her chance!" sighed the lady's maid. And no more was said on the subject then.

Tabitha's remark showed that the suspicion was quite in embryo as yet. Nevertheless, saying nothing to reveal what she had overheard, immediately after the reading Lady Constantine flew like a bird to where she knew that Swithin might be found.

He was in the plantation, sticking up little sticks to mark where the wooden cabin was to stand. She called him to a remote place under the funereal trees.

"I have altered my mind," she said. "I can have nothing to do with this matter."

"Indeed?" said Swithin, surprised.

"Astronomy is not my hobby any

longer. And you are not my Astronomer Royal."

"Oh, Lady Constantine!" cried the youth, aghast. "Why, the work is begun! I thought the equatorial was ordered."

She dropped her voice, though a Jericho shout would not have been overheard: "of course astronomy is my hobby privately, and you are to be my Astronomer Royal, and I still furnish the observatory; but not to the outer world. There is a reason against my indulgence in such scientific fancies openly; and the project must be arranged in this wise. The whole enterprise is yours: you rent the tower of me: you build the cabin: you get the equatorial. I simply give permission, since you desire it. The path that was to be made from the hill to the park is not to be thought of. There is to be no

communication between the house and the column. The equatorial will arrive addressed to you, and its cost I will pay through you. My name must not appear, and I vanish entirely from the undertaking. . . . This blind is necessary," she added, sighing. "Good-bye!"

"But you *do* take as much interest as before, and it *will* be yours just the same?" he said, walking after her. He scarcely comprehended the subterfuge, and was absolutely blind as to its reason.

"Can you doubt it? But I dare not do it openly."

With this she went away; and in due time there circulated through the parish an assertion that it was a mistake to suppose Lady Constantine had anything to do with Swithin St. Cleeve or his star-gazing schemes. She had merely allowed him to rent the tower of her for use as

his observatory, and to put some temporary fixtures on it for that purpose.

After this Lady Constantine lapsed into her former life of loneliness; and by these prompt measures the ghost of a rumour which had barely started into existence was speedily laid to rest. It had probably originated in her own house, and had gone but little further. Yet, despite her self-control, a certain north window of the Great House, that commanded an uninterrupted view of the upper ten feet of the column, revealed her as somewhat frequently gazing from it at a rotundity which had begun to appear on the summit. To those with whom she came in contact she sometimes addressed such remarks as, "Is young Mr. St. Cleeve getting on with his observatory? I hope he will fix his instruments without damaging the column, which is so inte-

resting to us as being in memory of my dear husband's great-grandfather—a truly brave man."

On one occasion her building-steward ventured to suggest to her that, Sir Blount having deputed to her the power to grant short leases in his absence, she should have a distinctive agreement with Swithin, as between landlord and tenant, with a stringent clause against his driving nails into the stonework of such an historical memorial. She replied that she did not wish to be severe on the last representative of such old and respected parishioners as St. Cleeve's mother's family had been, and of such a well-descended family as his father's; so that it would only be necessary for the steward to keep an eye on Mr. St. Cleeve's doings.

Further, when a letter arrived at the Great House from Hilton and Pimm's,

the opticians, with information that the equatorial was ready and packed, and that a man would be sent with it to fix it, she replied to that firm to the effect that their letter should have been addressed to Mr. St. Cleeve, the local astronomer, on whose behalf she had made the inquiries; that she had nothing more to do with the matter; that he would receive the instrument and pay the bill,—her guarantee being given for the latter performance.

CHAPTER VIII.

Lady Constantine then had the pleasure of beholding a waggon, laden with packing-cases, in the act of crossing the field towards the pillar; and not many days later Swithin, who had never come to the Great House since the luncheon, met her in a path which he knew to be one of her promenades.

"The equatorial is fixed, and the man gone," he said, half in doubt as to his speech, for her commands to him not to recognize her agency or patronage still puzzled him. "I respectfully wish—you could come and see it, Lady Constantine."

"I would rather not; I cannot."

"Saturn is lovely; Jupiter is simply sublime; I can see double stars in the Lion and in the Virgin, where I had seen only a single one before. It is all I required to set me going!"

"Is it so? I'll come. But—you need say nothing about my visit. I cannot come to-night, but I will some time this week. Yet only this once, to try the instrument. Afterwards you must be content to pursue your studies alone."

Swithin seemed but little affected at this announcement. "Hilton and Pimm's man handed me the bill," he continued.

"How much is it?"

He told her. "And the man who has built the hut and dome, and done the other fixing, has sent in his." He named this amount also.

"Very well. They shall be settled with.

My debts must be paid with my money, which you shall have at once,—in cash, since a cheque would hardly do. Come to the house for it this evening. But no, no !—you must not come openly; such is the world. Come to the window—the window that is exactly in a line with the long snowdrop bed, in the south front—at eight to-night, and I will give you what is necessary."

"Certainly, Lady Constantine," said the young man respectfully.

At eight that evening, accordingly, Swithin entered like a spectre upon the terrace to seek out the spot she had designated. The equatorial had so entirely absorbed his thoughts that he did not trouble himself seriously to conjecture the why and wherefore of her secrecy. If he casually thought of it, he set it down in a general way to an intensely generous wish

on her part not to lessen his influence among the sparse inhabitants by making him appear the object of patronage.

While he stood by the long snowdrop bed, which looked up at him like a nether Milky Way, the French casement of the window opposite softly opened, and a hand bordered by a glimmer of lace was stretched forth, from which he received a crisp little parcel,—bank-notes, apparently. He knew the hand, and held it long enough to press it to his lips, the only form which had ever occurred to him of expressing his gratitude to her without the incumbrance of clumsy words,—a vehicle at the best of times but rudely suited for such delicate merchandise. The hand was hastily withdrawn, as if the treatment had been unexpected. Then seemingly moved by second thoughts, she bent forward and said, "Is the night good for observations?"

"Perfect."

She paused. "Then I'll come to-night," she at last said. "It makes no difference to me, after all. Wait just one moment."

He waited, and she presently emerged, muffled up like a nun; whereupon they left the terrace and struck across the park together.

Very little was said by either till they were crossing the fallow, when he asked if his arm would help her. She did not take the offered support just then; but when they were ascending the prehistoric earthwork, under the heavy gloom of the fir-trees, she seized it, as if rather influenced by the oppressive solitude than by fatigue.

Thus they reached the foot of the column, ten thousand spirits in prison seeming to gasp their griefs from the funereal boughs overhead, and a few twigs scratching the pillar with the drag of impish claws as

tenacious as those figuring in St. Anthony's temptation.

"How intensely dark it is just here!" she whispered. "I wonder you can keep in the path. Many ancient Britons lie buried there doubtless."

He led her round to the other side, where, feeling his way with his hands, he suddenly left her, appearing a moment after with a light.

"What place is this?" she exclaimed.

"This is the new wood cabin," said he.

She could just discern the outline of a little house, not unlike a large bathing-machine without wheels.

"I have kept lights ready here," he went on, "as I thought you might come any evening, and possibly bring company."

"Don't quarrel with me for coming alone!" she exclaimed, with sensitive

promptness. "There are social reasons for what I do of which you know nothing."

"Perhaps it is much to my discredit that I don't know."

"Not at all. You are all the better for it. God forbid that I should enlighten you. Well, I see this is the hut. But I am more curious to go to the top of the tower, and make discoveries."

He brought a little lantern from the cabin, and lighted her up the winding staircase to the temple of that sublime mystery on whose threshold he stood as priest.

The top of the column was quite changed. The tub-shaped space within the parapet, formerly open to the air and sun, was now arched over by a light dome of lath-work covered with felt. But this dome was not fixed. At the line where its base descended

to the parapet there were half a dozen iron balls, precisely like cannon-shot, standing loosely in a groove, and on these the dome rested its whole weight. In the side of the dome was a slit, through which the wind blew and the North Star beamed, and towards it the end of the great telescope was directed. This latter magnificent object, with its circles, axes, and handles complete, was securely fixed in the middle of the floor.

"But you can only see one part of the sky through that slit," said she.

The astronomer stretched out his arm, and the whole dome turned horizontally round, running on the balls with a rumble like that of nearing thunder. Instead of the star Polaris, which had first been peeping in upon them through the slit, there now appeared the countenances of Castor and Pollux. Swithin then manipulated the

equatorial, and put it through its capabilities in like manner.

She was enchanted; being rather excitable, she even clapped her hands just once. She turned to him: "Now are you happy?"

"But it is all *yours*, Lady Constantine."

"At this moment. But that's a defect which can soon be remedied. When is your birthday?"

"Next month,—the seventh."

"Then it shall all be yours,—a birthday present."

The young man protested; it was too much.

"No, you must accept it all,—equatorial, dome, stand, hut, and everything that has been put here for this astronomical purpose. The possession of these apparatus would only compromise me. Already they are reputed to be yours, and they must be

made yours. There is no help for it. If ever" (here her voice lost some firmness),—"if ever you go away from me,—from this place, I mean,—and marry, and settle in a new home elsewhere for good, and forget me, you must take these things, equatorial and all, and never tell your wife or anybody how they came to be yours."

"I wish I could do something more for you!" exclaimed the much-moved astronomer. "If you could but share my fame,—supposing I get any, which I may die before doing,—it would be a little compensation. As to my going away and marrying, I certainly shall not. I may go away, but I shall never marry."

"Why not?"

"A beloved science is enough wife for me,—combined, perhaps, with a little warm friendship with one of kindred pursuits.

"Who is the friend?"

"Yourself I should like it to be."

"You would have to become a woman before I could be that, publicly; or I a man," she replied, with dry melancholy.

"Why I a woman, or you a man, dear Lady Constantine?"

"I cannot explain. No; you must keep your fame and your science all to yourself, and I must keep my—troubles."

Swithin, to divert her from melancholy —not knowing that in the expression of her melancholy thus and now she found much pleasure,—changed the subject by asking if they should take some observations.

"Yes; the scenery is well hung to-night," she said, looking out upon the heavens.

Then they proceeded to scan the sky, roving from planet to star, from single stars to double stars, from double to coloured stars, in the cursory manner of

the merely curious. They plunged down to that at other times invisible stellar multitude in the back rows of the celestial theatre: remote layers of constellations whose shapes were new and singular; pretty twinklers which for infinite ages had spent their beams without calling forth from a single earthly poet a single line, or being able to bestow a ray of comfort on a single benighted traveller.

"And to think," said Lady Constantine, "that the whole race of shepherds, since the beginning of the world,—even those immortal shepherds who watched near Bethlehem,—should have gone into their graves without knowing that for one star that lighted them in their labours, there were a hundred as good behind trying to do so! . . . I have a feeling for this instrument not unlike the awe I should feel in the presence of a great magician in

whom I really believed. Its powers are so enormous, and weird, and fantastical, that I should have a personal fear in being with it alone. Music drew an angel down, said the poet; but what is that to drawing down worlds!"

"I often experience a kind of fear of the sky after sitting in the observing-chair a long time," he answered. "And when I walk home afterwards I also fear it, for what I know is there, but cannot see, as one naturally fears the presence of a vast formless something that only reveals a very little of itself. That's partly what I meant by saying that magnitude, which up to a certain point has grandeur, has beyond it ghastliness."

Thus the interest of their sidereal observations led them on, till the knowledge that scarce any other human vision was travelling within a hundred million miles

of their own gave them such a sense of the isolation of that faculty as almost to be a sense of isolation in respect of their whole personality, causing a shudder at its absoluteness. At night, when human discords and harmonies are hushed, in a general sense, for the greater part of twelve hours, there is nothing to moderate the blow with which the infinitely great, the stellar universe, strikes down upon the infinitely little, the mind of the beholder; and this was the case now. Having got closer to immensity than their fellow-creatures, they saw at once its beauty and its frightfulness. They more and more felt the contrast between their own tiny magnitudes and those among which they had recklessly plunged, till they were oppressed with the presence of a vastness they could not cope with even as an idea, and which hung about them like a nightmare.

He stood by her while she observed; she by him when they changed places. Once that Swithin's emancipation from a trammelling body had been effected by the telescope, and he was well away in space, she felt her influence over him diminishing to nothing. He was quite unconscious of his terrestrial neighbourings, and of herself as one of them. It still further reduced her towards unvarnished simplicity in her manner to him.

The silence was broken only by the ticking of the clock-work which gave diurnal motion to the instrument. The stars moved on, the end of the telescope followed, but their tongues stood still. To expect that he was ever voluntarily going to end the pause by speech was apparently futile. She laid her hand upon his arm.

He started, withdrew his eye from the telescope, and brought himself back to the

earth by a visible—almost painful—effort.

"Do come out of it," she coaxed, with a softness in her voice which any man but unpractised Swithin would have felt to be exquisite. "I feel that I have been so foolish as to put in your hands an instrument to effect my own annihilation. Not a word have you spoken for the last ten minutes."

"I have been mentally getting on with my great theory. I hope soon to be able to publish it to the world. What, are you going? I will walk with you, Lady Constantine. When will you come again?"

"When your great theory is published to the world."

CHAPTER IX.

Lady Constantine, if narrowly observed at this time, would have seemed to be deeply troubled in conscience, and particularly after the interview above described. Ash-Wednesday occurred in the calendar a few days later, and she went to morning service with a look of genuine contrition on her emotional and yearning countenance.

Besides herself the congregation consisted only of the parson, clerk, school-children, and three old people living on alms, who sat under the reading-desk; and thus, when Mr. Torkingham blazed forth the denunciatory sentences of the Commi-

nation, nearly the whole force of them seemed to descend upon her own shoulders. Looking across the empty pews, she saw through the one or two clear panes of the window opposite a youthful figure in the churchyard, and the very feeling against which she had tried to pray returned again irresistibly.

When she came out and had crossed into the private walk, Swithin came forward to speak to her. This was a most unusual circumstance, and argued a matter of importance.

"I have made an amazing discovery in connexion with the variable stars!" he exclaimed. "It will excite the whole astronomical world, and the world outside but little less. I had long suspected the true secret of their variability; but it was by the merest chance on earth that I hit upon a proof of my guess. Your equatorial

has done it, my good, kind Lady Constantine, and our fame is established for ever!"

He sprang into the air, and waved his hat in his triumph.

"Oh, I am so glad—so rejoiced!" she cried. "What is it? But don't stop to tell me. Publish it at once in some paper; nail your name to it, or somebody will seize the idea and appropriate it,—forestall you in some way. It will be Adams and Leverrier over again."

"If I may walk with you I will explain the nature of the discovery. It accounts for the occasional green tint of Castor, and every difficulty. I said I would be the Copernicus of the stellar system, and I have begun to be. Yet who knows?"

"Now don't be so up and down! I shall not understand your explanation, and I would rather not know it. I shall reveal

it if it is very grand. Women, you know, are not safe depositaries of such valuable secrets. You may walk with me a little way, with great pleasure. Then go and write your account, so as to insure your ownership of the discovery. . . . But how you have watched!" she cried, in a sudden accession of anxiety, as she turned to look more closely at him. "The orbits of your eyes are leaden, and your eyelids are red and heavy. Don't do it,—pray don't! You will be ill, and break down."

"I have, it is true, been up a little late this last week," he said cheerfully. "In fact, I couldn't tear myself away from the equatorial; it is such a wonderful possession that it keeps me there till daylight. But what does that matter, now I have made the discovery?"

"Ah, it *does* matter! Now, promise me —I insist—that you will not commit such

imprudences again; for what should I do if my Astronomer Royal were to die?"

She laughed, but far too apprehensively to be effective as a display of levity.

They parted, and he went home to write out his paper. He promised to call as soon as his discovery was in print. Then they waited for the result.

It is impossible to describe the tremulous state of Lady Constantine during the interval. The warm interest she took in Swithin St. Cleeve—many would have said dangerously warm interest—made his hopes her hopes; and though she sometimes admitted to herself that great allowance was requisite for the overweening confidence of youth in the future, she permitted herself to be blinded to probabilities for the pleasure of sharing his dreams. It seemed not unreasonable to suppose the present hour to be the beginning of reali-

zation to her darling wish that this young man should become famous. He had worked hard, and why should he not be famous early? His very simplicity in mundane affairs afforded a strong presumption that in things celestial he might be wise. To obtain support for this hypothesis she had only to think over the lives of many eminent astronomers.

She waited feverishly for the flourish of trumpets from afar, by which she expected the announcement of his discovery to be greeted. Knowing that immediate intelligence of the outburst would be brought to her by himself, she watched from the windows of the Great House each morning for a sight of his figure hastening down the glade.

But he did not come.

A long array of wet days passed their dreary shapes before her, and made the

waiting still more tedious. On one of these occasions she ran across to the tower, at the risk of a severe cold. The door was locked.

Two days after she went again. The door was locked still. But this was only to be expected in such weather. Yet she would have gone on to his house, had there not been one reason too many against such precipitancy. As astronomer and astronomer there was no harm in their meetings; but as woman and man she feared them,—for herself, at any rate.

Ten days passed without a sight of him; ten blurred and dreary days, during which the whole landscape dripped like a mop; the park trees swabbed the gravel from the drive, while the sky was a zinc-coloured archivault of immovable cloud. It seemed as if the whole science of astronomy had never been real, and that the

heavenly bodies, with their motions, were as theoretical as the lines and circles of a bygone mathematical problem.

She could content herself no longer with fruitless visits to the column, and when the rain had a little abated she walked to the nearest hamlet, and in a conversation with the first old woman she met contrived to lead up to the subject of Swithin St. Cleeve, by talking about his grandmother.

"Ah, poor old heart; 'tis a bad time for her, my lady!" exclaimed the dame.

"What?"

"Her grandson is dying; and such a gentleman through!"

"What! . . . Oh, it has something to do with that dreadful discovery!"

"Discovery, my lady?"

She left the old woman with an evasive answer, and with a breaking heart crept

along the road. Tears brimmed into her eyes as she walked, and by the time that she was out of sight sobs burst forth tumultuously.

"I am too fond of him!" she moaned; "but I can't help it; and I don't care if it's wrong,—I don't care!"

Without further considerations as to who beheld her doings, she instinctively went straight towards Mrs. Martin's. Seeing a man coming, she calmed herself sufficiently to ask him through her dropped veil how poor Mr. St. Cleeve was that day. But she only got the same reply: "They say he is dying, my lady."

When Swithin had parted from Lady Constantine, on the previous Ash-Wednesday, he had gone straight to the homestead and prepared his account of "A New Astronomical Discovery." It was written

perhaps in too glowing a rhetoric for the true scientific tone of mind; but there was no doubt that his assertion met with a most startling aptness all the difficulties which had accompanied the received theories on the phenomena attending those changeable suns of marvellous systems so far away. It accounted for the nebulous mist that surrounds some of them at their weakest time; in short, took up a position of probability which has never yet been successfully assailed.

The papers were written in triplicate, and carefully sealed up with blue wax. One copy was directed to Greenwich, another to the Royal Society, another to a prominent astronomer. A brief statement of the essence of the discovery was also prepared for the leading daily paper.

He considered these documents, embodying as they did two years of his

constant thought, reading, and observation, too important to be entrusted for posting to the hands of a messenger; too important to be sent to the sub-post-office at hand. Though the day was wet, dripping wet, he went on foot with them to a chief office, five miles off, and registered them. Quite exhausted by the walk, after his long night-work, wet through, yet sustained by the sense of a great achievement, he called at a bookseller's for the astronomical periodicals to which he subscribed; then, resting for a short time at an inn, he plodded his way homewards, reading his papers as he went, and planning how to enjoy a repose, on his laurels, of a week or more.

On he strolled through the rain, holding the umbrella vertically over the exposed page to keep it dry while he read. Suddenly his eye was struck by an article. It

was the review of a pamphlet by an American astronomer, in which the author announced a conclusive discovery with regard to variable stars.

The discovery was precisely the discovery of Swithin St. Cleeve. Another man had forestalled his fame by a period of about six weeks.

Then the youth found that the goddess Philosophy, to whom he had vowed to dedicate his whole life, would not in return support him through a single hour of despair. In truth, the impishness of circumstance was newer to him than it would have been to a philosopher of threescore-and-ten. In a wild wish for annihilation he flung himself down on a patch of heather that lay a little removed from the road, and in this humid bed remained motionless, while time passed by unheeded.

At last, from sheer misery and weariness, he fell asleep.

The March rain pelted him mercilessly, the beaded moisture, from the heavily charged locks of heath, penetrated him through back and sides, and clotted his hair to unsightly tags and tufts. When he awoke it was dark. He thought of his grandmother, and of her possible alarm at missing him. On attempting to rise, he found that he could hardly bend his joints, and that his clothes were as heavy as lead from saturation. His teeth chattering and his knees trembling he pursued his way home, where his appearance excited great concern. He was obliged at once to retire to bed, and the next day he was delirious from the chill.

It was about ten days after this unhappy occurrence that Lady Constantine learnt

the news, as above described, and hastened along to the homestead in that state of anguish in which the heart is no longer under the control of the judgment, and self-abandonment, even to error, verges on heroism.

On reaching the house in Welland Bottom, the door was opened to her by old Hannah, who wore an assiduously sorrowful look; and Lady Constantine was shown into the large room,—so wide that the beams bent in the middle,—where she took her seat in one of a methodic range of chairs, beneath a portrait of the Reverend Mr. St. Cleeve, her astronomer's erratic father.

The eight unwatered dying plants, in the row of eight flower-pots, denoted that there was something wrong in the house. Mrs. Martin came downstairs, fretting, her wonder at beholding Lady Constantine

not altogether displacing the previous mood of grief.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish, my lady!" she exclaimed.

Lady Constantine said, "Hush!" and pointed inquiringly upward.

"He is not overhead, my lady," replied Swithin's grandmother. "His bedroom is at the back of the house."

"How is he now?"

"He is better, just at this moment; and we are more hopeful. But he changes so."

"May I go up? I know he would like to see me."

Her presence having been made known to the sufferer, she was conducted upstairs to Swithin's room. The way thither was through the large chamber he had used as a study and for the manufacture of optical instruments. There lay the large paste-

board telescope, that had been just such a failure as Crusoe's large boat; there were his diagrams, maps, globes, and celestial apparatus of various sorts. The absence of the worker through illness or death is sufficient to touch the prosiest workshop and tools with the hues of pathos, and it was with a swelling bosom that Lady Constantine passed through this arena of his youthful activities to the little chamber where he lay.

Old Mrs. Martin sat down by the window, and Lady Constantine bent over Swithin.

"Don't speak to me!" she whispered. "It will weaken you; it will excite you. If you do speak, it must be very softly."

She took his hand, and one irrepressible tear fell upon it.

"Nothing will excite me now, Lady Constantine," he said; "not even your goodness

in coming. My last excitement was when I lost the battle. . . . Do you know that my discovery has been forestalled? It is that that's killing me."

"But you are going to recover; you are better, they say. Is it so?"

"I think I am, to-day. But who can be sure?"

"The poor boy was so upset at finding that his labour had been thrown away," said his grandmother, "that he lay down in the rain, and chilled his life out."

"How could you do it?" Lady Constantine whispered. "Oh, how could you think so much of renown, and so little of me? Why, for every discovery made there are ten behind that await making. To commit suicide like this, as if there were nobody in the world to care for you!"

"It was done in my haste, and I am

very, very sorry for it! I beg both you and all my few friends never, never to forgive me! It would kill me with self-reproach if you were to pardon my rashness!"

At this moment the doctor was announced, and Mrs. Martin went downstairs to receive him. Lady Constantine thought she would remain to hear his report, and for this purpose withdrew, and sat down in a nook of the adjoining work-room of Swithin, the doctor meeting her as he passed through it into the sick chamber.

He was there a torturingly long time; but at length he came out to the room she waited in, and crossed it on his way downstairs. She rose and followed him to the stairhead.

"How is he?" she anxiously asked. "Will he get over it?"

The doctor, not knowing the depth of

her interest in the patient, spoke with the blunt candour natural towards a comparatively indifferent inquirer.

"No, Lady Constantine," he replied; "there's a change for the worse." And he retired down the stairs.

Scarcely knowing what she did, Lady Constantine ran back to Swithin's side, flung herself upon the bed, and in a paroxysm of sorrow kissed him.

CHAPTER X.

The placid inhabitants of the parish of Welland, including warbling waggoners, lone shepherds, ploughmen, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the gardener at the Great House, the steward and agent, the parson, clerk, and so on, were hourly expecting the announcement of St. Cleeve's death. The sexton had been going to see his brother-in-law, nine miles distant, but promptly postponed the visit for a few days, that there might be the regular professional hand present to toll the bell in a note of due fulness and solemnity; an attempt by a deputy, on a previous occa-

sion of his absence, having degenerated into a miserable stammering clang that was a disgrace to the parish.

But Swithin St. Cleeve did not decease, a fact of which, indeed, the habituated reader will have been well aware ever since the rain came down upon the young man in a certain paragraph of the ninth chapter, and led to his alarming illness. Too many maimed histories (such as his would have read, in those circumstances) are hourly enacting themselves in this dun-coloured world to justify the gratuitous infliction of yet other mournful details concerning those

> "Who lay great bases for eternity
> Which prove more short than waste or ruining."

How it arose that he did not die was in this wise; and his example affords another instance of that reflex rule of the vassal

soul over the sovereign body, which, operating so wonderfully in elastic natures, and more or less in all, originally gave rise to the legend that the supremacy lay on the other side.

The evening of the day after the tender, despairing, farewell kiss of Lady Constantine, when he was a little less weak than during her visit, he lay with his face to the window. He lay alone, quiet and resigned. He had been thinking, sometimes of her and other friends, but chiefly of his lost discovery. Although nearly unconscious at the time, he had yet been aware of that kiss, as the delicate flush which followed it upon his cheek would have told; but he had attached little importance to it as between woman and man. Had he been dying of love instead of wet weather, perhaps the impulsive act of that handsome lady would have been seized on

as a proof that his love was returned. As it was, her kiss seemed but the evidence of a naturally demonstrative kindliness, felt towards him chiefly because he was believed to be leaving her for ever.

The reds of sunset passed, and dusk drew on. Old Hannah came up-stairs to pull down the blinds, and as she advanced to the window he said to her, in a faint voice, "Well, Hannah, what news to-day?"

"Oh, nothing, sir," Hannah replied, looking out of the window with sad apathy, "only that there's a comet, they say."

"A WHAT?" said the dying astronomer, starting up on his elbow.

"A comet—that's all, Master Swithin," repeated Hannah, in a lower voice, fearing she had done harm in some way.

"Well, tell me, tell me!" cried Swithin. "Is it Gambart's? Is it Charles the Fifth's, or Halley's, or Faye's, or whose?"

"Hush!" said she, thinking St. Cleeve slightly delirious again. "'Tis God A'mighty's, of course. I haven't seed en myself; but they say he's getting bigger every night, and that he'll be the biggest one known for fifty years when he's full growed. There, you must not talk any more now, or I'll go away."

Here was an amazing event, little noise as it had made in the happening. Of all phenomena that he had longed to witness during his short astronomical career, those appertaining to comets had excited him most. That the magnificent comet of 1811 would not return again for thirty centuries had been quite a permanent regret with him. And now, when the

bottomless abyss of death seemed yawning beneath his feet, one of these much-desired apparitions, as large, apparently, as any of its tribe, had chosen to show itself.

"Oh, if I could but live to see that comet through my equatorial!" he cried.

Compared with comets, variable stars, which he had hitherto made his study, were, from their remoteness, uninteresting. They were to the former as the celebrities of Ujiji or Unyamwesi to the celebrities of his own country. Attached to the solar system, these dazzling and perplexing rangers, the fascination of all astronomers, rendered themselves still more fascinating by the sinister suspicion attaching to them of being possibly the ultimate destroyers of the human race. In his physical prostration St. Cleeve wept bitterly at not being hale and strong

enough to welcome with proper honour the present specimen of these desirable visitors.

The strenuous wish to live and behold the new phenomenon, supplanting the utter weariness of existence that he had heretofore experienced, lent him a new vitality. The crisis passed; there was a turn for the better; and after that he rapidly mended. The comet had in all probability saved his life. The limitless and complex wonders of the sky resumed their old power over his imagination; the possibilities of that unfathomable blue ocean were endless. Finer feats than ever he would perform were to be achieved in its investigation. What Lady Constantine had said, that for one discovery made ten awaited making, was strikingly verified by the sudden appearance of this splendid marvel.

The windows of St. Cleeve's bedroom faced the west, and nothing would satisfy him but that his bed should be so pulled round as to give him a view of the low sky, in which the as yet minute tadpole of fire was recognizable. The mere sight of it seemed to lend him sufficient resolution to complete his own cure forthwith. His only fear now was lest, from some unexpected cause or other, the comet would vanish before he could get to the observatory on Rings-Hill Speer.

In his fervour to begin observing, he directed that an old telescope, which he had used in his first celestial attempts, should be tied at one end to the bed-post, and at the other fixed near his eye as he reclined. Equipped only with this rough improvisation, he began to take notes. Lady Constantine was forgotten, till one

day, suddenly, wondering if she knew of the important phenomenon, he revolved in his mind whether, as a fellow-student and sincere friend of his, she ought not to be sent for, and instructed in the use of the equatorial.

But though the image of Lady Constantine, in spite of her kindness and unmistakably warm heart, had been obscured in his mind by the heavenly body, she had not so readily forgotten him. Too shy to repeat her visit after so nearly betraying her secret, she yet, every day, by the most ingenious and subtle means that could be devised by a woman who feared for herself, but could not refrain from tampering with danger, ascertained the state of her young friend's health. On hearing of the turn in his condition, she rejoiced on his account, and became yet more despondent on her own. If he had died, she might have

mused on him as her dear departed saint without much sin: but his return to life was a delight that bewildered and dismayed.

One evening, a little later on, he was sitting at his bedroom window as usual, waiting for a sufficient decline of light to reveal the comet's form, when he beheld, crossing the field contiguous to the house, a figure which he knew to be hers. He thought she must be coming to see him on the great comet question, to discuss which with so delightful and kind a comrade was an expectation full of pleasure. Hence he keenly observed her approach, till something happened that surprised him.

When, at the descent of the hill, she had reached the stile that admitted to Mrs. Martin's garden, Lady Constantine stood quite still for a minute or more, her gaze bent on the ground. Instead of coming

on to the house she went heavily and slowly back, almost as if in pain; and then at length, quickening her pace, she was soon out of sight. She appeared in the path no more that day.

CHAPTER XI.

WHY had Lady Constantine stopped and turned?

A misgiving had taken sudden possession of her. Her true sentiment towards St. Cleeve was too recognizable by herself to be tolerated.

That she had a legitimate interest in him as a young astronomer was true; that her sympathy on account of his severe illness had been natural and commendable was also true. But the superfluous feeling was what filled her with trepidation.

Superfluities have been defined as things

you cannot do without, and this particular emotion, that came not within her rightful measure, was in danger of becoming just such a superfluity with her. In short, she felt there and then that to see St. Cleeve again would be an impropriety; and by a violent effort she retreated from his precincts, as he had observed.

She resolved to ennoble her conduct from that moment of her life onwards. She would exercise kind patronage towards Swithin without once indulging herself with his company. Inexpressibly dear to her deserted heart he was becoming, but for the future he should at least be hidden from her eyes. To speak plainly, it was growing a serious question whether, if he were not hidden from her eyes, she would not soon be plunging across the ragged boundary which divides the permissible from the forbidden.

By the time she had drawn near home the sun was going down. The heavy many-chevroned church, now subdued by violet shadow, except where its upper courses caught the western stroke of flame-colour, stood close to her grounds, though the village of which it formerly was the nucleus had become quite depopulated, its cottages having been demolished to enlarge the park, leaving the old building to stand there alone, like a standard without an army.

It was Friday night, and she heard the organist practising voluntaries within. The hour, the notes, the even-song of the birds, and her own previous emotions, combined to influence her devotionally. She entered, turning to the right and passing under the chancel arch, where she sat down and viewed the whole empty length, east and west. The semi-Norman

arches of the nave, with their multitudinous notchings, were still visible by the light from the tower window, but the lower portion of the building was in obscurity, except where the feeble glimmer from the candle of the organist spread a glow-worm radiance around. The player, who was Miss Tabitha Lark, continued without intermission to produce her wandering sounds, unconscious of any one's presence except that of the youthful blower at her side.

The rays from the organist's candle illuminated but one small fragment of the chancel outside the precincts of the instrument, and that was the portion of the eastern wall whereon the ten commandments were inscribed. The gilt letters shone sternly into Lady Constantine's eyes; and she, being as impressionable as a turtle-dove, watched a certain one of those command-

ments on the second table, till its thunder broke her spirit with blank contrition.

She knelt down, and did her utmost to eradicate those impulses towards St. Cleeve which were inconsistent with her position as the wife of an absent man, though not unnatural in her as his victim.

She knelt till she seemed scarcely to belong to the time she lived in, which lost the magnitude that the nearness of its perspective lent it on ordinary occasions, and took its actual rank in the long line of other centuries. Having once got out of herself, seen herself from afar off, she was calmer, and went on to register a magnanimous vow. She would look about for some maiden fit and likely to make St. Cleeve happy; and this girl she would endow with what money she could afford, that the natural result of their apposition should do him no worldly harm. The

interest of her, Lady Constantine's, life should be in watching the development of love between Swithin and the ideal maiden.

The very painfulness of the scheme to her susceptible heart made it pleasing to her conscience; and she wondered that she had not before this time thought of a stratagem which united the possibility of benefiting the astronomer with the advantage of guarding against peril to both Swithin and herself. By providing for him a suitable helpmate she would preclude the dangerous awakening in him of sentiments reciprocating her own.

Arrived at a point of exquisite misery through this heroic intention, Lady Constantine's tears moistened the books upon which her forehead was bowed. And as she heard her feverish heart throb against the desk, she firmly believed the wearing impulses of that heart would put an end

to her sad life, and momentarily recalled the banished image of St. Cleeve to apostrophize him in thoughts that paraphrased the quaint lines of *Lieb' Liebchen*:—

"Dear my love, press thy hand to my breast, and tell
If thou tracest the knocks in that narrow cell;
A carpenter dwells there; cunning is he,
And slyly he's shaping a coffin for me!"

Lady Constantine was disturbed by a break in the organist's meandering practice, and raising her head she saw a person standing by the player. It was Mr. Torkingham, and what he said was distinctly audible. He was inquiring for herself.

"I thought I saw Lady Constantine walk this way," he rejoined to Tabitha's negative. "I am very anxious indeed to meet with her."

She went forward. "I am here," she said. "Don't stop playing, Miss Lark. What is it, Mr. Torkingham?"

Tabitha thereupon resumed her playing, and Mr. Torkingham joined Lady Constantine.

"I have some very serious intelligence to break to your ladyship," he said. "But —I will not interrupt you here." (He had seen her rise from her knees to come to him.) "I will call at the House the first moment you can receive me, after reaching home."

"No, tell me here," she said, seating herself.

He came close, and placed his hand on the poppy-head of the seat.

"I have received a telegram," he resumed haltingly, "in which I am requested to prepare you for the contents of a letter that you will receive to-morrow morning."

"I am quite ready."

"The subject is briefly this, Lady Con-

stantine: that you have been a widow for more than eighteen months."

"Dead!"

"Yes. Sir Blount was attacked by dysentery and malarious fever, on the banks of the Zouga in South Africa, so long ago as last October twelvemonths, and it carried him off. Of the three men who were with him, two succumbed to the same illness, a hundred miles further on; while the third, retracing his steps into a healthier district, remained there with a native tribe, and took no pains to make the circumstances known. It seems to be only by the mere accident of his having told some third party that we know of the matter now. This is all I can tell you at present."

She was greatly agitated for a few moments; and the Table of the Law opposite which now seemed to appertain to another dispensation, glistened indistinctly

upon a vision still obscured by the old tears.

"Shall I conduct you home?" asked the parson.

"No, thank you," said Lady Constantine. "I would rather go alone."

CHAPTER XII.

On the afternoon of the next day Mr. Torkingham, who occasionally dropped in to see St. Cleeve, called again as usual; after duly remarking on the state of the weather, congratulating him on his sure though slow improvement, and answering his inquiries about the comet, he said, "You have heard, I suppose, of what has happened to Lady Constantine?"

"No! Nothing serious?"

"Yes, it is serious." The parson informed him of the death of Sir Blount, and of the accidents which had hindered all knowledge of the same,—accidents

favoured by the estrangement of the pair and the cessation of correspondence between them for some time.

His listener received the news with the concern of a friend, Lady Constantine's aspect in his eyes depending but little on her condition matrimonially.

"There was no attempt to bring him home when he died?"

"Oh, no. The climate necessitates instant burial. We shall have more particulars in a day or two, doubtless."

"Poor Lady Constantine,—so good and so sensitive as she is! I suppose she is quite prostrated by the bad news."

"Well, she is rather serious, — not prostrated. The household is going into mourning."

"Ah, no, she would not be quite prostrated," murmured Swithin, recollecting himself. "He was unkind to her in many

ways. Do you think she will go away from Welland?"

That the vicar could not tell. But he feared that Sir Blount's affairs had been in a seriously involved condition, which might necessitate many and unexpected changes.

Time showed that Mr. Torkingham's surmises were correct.

During the long weeks of early summer, through which the young man still lay imprisoned, if not within his own chamber, within the limits of the house and garden, news reached him that Sir Blount's mismanagement and eccentric behaviour were resulting in serious consequences to Lady Constantine; nothing less, indeed, than her almost complete impoverishment. His personalty was swallowed up in paying his debts, and the Welland estate was so heavily charged with annuities to his distant relatives that only a mere pittance was left

for her. She was reducing the establishment to the narrowest compass compatible with decent gentility. The horses were sold one by one; the carriages also; the greater part of the house was shut up, and she resided in the smallest rooms. All that was allowed to remain of her former contingent of male servants were an odd man and a boy. Instead of using a carriage, she now drove about in a donkey-chair, the said boy walking in front to clear the way and keep the animal in motion; while she wore, so his informants reported, not an ordinary widow's cap or bonnet, but something even plainer, the black material being drawn tightly round her face, giving her features a small, demure, devout cast, very pleasing to the eye.

"Now, what's the most curious thing in this, Mr. San Cleeve," said Sammy Blore, who, in calling to inquire after Swithin's

health, had imparted some of the above particulars, "is that my lady seems not to mind being a pore woman half so much as we do at seeing her so. 'Tis a wonderful gift, Mr. San Cleeve, wonderful, to be able to guide yerself, and not let loose yer soul in blasting at such a misfortune. I should go and drink neat regular, as soon as I had swallered my breakfast, if it had happened to me; but my lady's plan is best. Though I only know such hobbles by hearsay, to be sure, for I never had nothing to lose."

Meanwhile, the observatory was not forgotten; nor that visitant of singular shape and habits, which had appeared in the sky from no one knew whither, trailing its luminous streamer, and proceeding on its way in the face of a wondering world, till it should choose to vanish as suddenly as it had come.

When, about a month after the above

dialogue took place, Swithin was allowed to go about as usual, his first pilgrimage was to the Rings-Hill Speer. Here he studied at leisure what he had come to see.

On his return to the homestead, just after sunset, he found his grandmother and Hannah in a state of great concern. The former was looking out for him against the evening light, her face showing itself worn and rutted, like an old highway, by the passing of many days. Her information was that in his absence Lady Constantine had called in her driving-chair, to inquire for him. Her ladyship had wished to observe the comet through the great telescope, but had found the door locked when she applied at the tower. Would he kindly leave the door unfastened to-morrow, she had asked, that she might be able to go to the column on the following evening, for the same purpose? She did not require him to attend.

During the next day he sent Hannah with the key to Welland House, not caring to leave the tower open. As evening advanced and the comet grew distinct, he doubted if Lady Constantine could handle the telescope alone with any pleasure or profit to herself. Unable, as a devotee to science, to rest under this misgiving, he crossed the field in the furrow that he had used ever since the corn was sown, and entered the plantation. His unpractised mind never once guessed that her stipulations against his coming might have existed along with a perverse hope that he would come.

On ascending he found her already there. She sat in the observing-chair: the warm light from the west, which flowed in through the opening of the dome, brightened her face, and her face only, her robes of sable lawn rendering the remainder of her figure almost invisible.

"You have come!" she said with shy pleasure. "I did not require you. But never mind." She extended her hand cordially to him.

Before speaking he looked at her with a great new interest in his eye. It was the first time that he had seen her thus, and she was altered in more than dress A soberly-sweet expression sat on her face. It was of a rare and peculiar shade—something that he had never seen before in woman.

"Have you nothing to say?" she continued. "Your footsteps were audible to me from the very bottom, and I knew they were yours. You look almost restored."

"I am almost restored," he replied, respectfully pressing her hand. "A reason for living arose, and I lived."

"What reason?" she inquired, with a rapid blush.

He pointed to the rocket-like object in the western sky.

"You mean the comet? Well, you will never make a courtier! You know, of course, what has happened to me; that I have no longer a husband—have had none for a year and a half. Have you also heard that I am now quite a poor woman? Tell me what you think of it."

"I have thought very little of it, since I heard that you seemed to mind poverty but little. There is even this good in it, that I may now be able to show you some little kindness for all those you have done me, my dear lady."

"Unless for economy's sake, I go and live abroad,—at Dinan, Versailles, or Boulogne."

Swithin, who had never thought of such a contingency, was earnest in his regrets;

without, however, showing more than a sincere friend's disappointment.

"I did not say it was absolutely necessary," she continued. "I have, in fact, grown so homely and home-loving, I am so interested in the place and the people here, that, in spite of advice, I have almost determined not to let the house; but to continue the less business-like but pleasanter alternative of living humbly in a part of it, and shutting up the rest."

"Your love of astronomy is getting as strong as mine!" he said ardently. "You could not tear yourself away from the observatory!"

"You might have supposed me capable of a little human feeling as well as scientific, in connexion with the observatory."

"Dear Lady Constantine, by admitting that your astronomer has also a part of your interest—"

"Ah, you did not find it out without my telling!" she said, with a playfulness which was scarcely playful, a new accession of pinkness being visible in her face. "I diminish myself in your esteem by reminding you."

"You might do anything in this world without diminishing yourself in my esteem, after the goodness you have shown. And more than that, no misrepresentation, no rumour, no damning appearance whatever, would ever shake my loyalty to you."

"But you put a very matter-of-fact construction on my motives sometimes. You see me in such a hard light that I have to drop hints in quite a manœuvring manner to let you know I am as sympathetic as other people. I sometimes think you would rather have me die than have your equatorial stolen. Confess that your admiration for me was based on my house

and position in the county! Now I am shorn of all that glory, such as it was, and am a widow, and am poorer than my tenants, and can no longer buy telescopes, and am unable, from the narrowness of my circumstances, to mix in circles that people formerly said I adorned, I fear I have lost the little hold I once had over you."

"You are as unjust now as you have been generous hitherto," said St. Cleeve, with tears in his eyes at the gentle banter of the lady, which he, poor innocent, read as her real opinions. Seizing her hand, he continued, in tones between reproach and anger, "I swear to you that I have but two devotions, two thoughts, two hopes, and two blessings in this world, and that one of them is yourself!"

"And the other?"

"The pursuit of astronomy."

"And astronomy stands first."

"I have never ordinated two such dissimilar ideas. And why should you deplore your altered circumstances, my dear lady? Your widowhood, if I may take the liberty to speak on such a subject, is, though I suppose a sadness, not perhaps an unmixed evil. For though your pecuniary troubles have been discovered to the world and yourself by it, your happiness in marriage was, as you have generously confided to me, not great; and you are now left free as a bird to follow your own hobbies."

"I wonder you recognize that."

"But perhaps," he added, with a sigh of regret, "you will again fall a prey to some man, some uninteresting country squire or other, and be lost to the scientific world, after all."

"If I fall a prey to any man, it will not be to a country squire. But don't go on

with this, for heaven's sake! You may think what you like in silence."

"We are forgetting the comet," said St. Cleeve. He turned, and set the instrument in order for observation, and wheeled round the dome.

While they were looking at the nucleus of the fiery plume, that now filled so large a space of the sky as completely to dominate it, Swithin dropped his gaze upon the field, and beheld in the dying light a number of labourers crossing directly towards the column.

"What do you see?" Lady Constantine asked, without ceasing to observe the comet.

"Some of the work-folk are coming this way. I know what they are coming for, —I promised to let them look at the comet through the glass."

"They must not come up here," she said decisively.

"They shall await your time."

"I have a special reason for wishing them not to see me here. If you ask why, I can tell you. They mistakenly suspect my interest to be less in astronomy than in the astronomer, and they must have no showing for such a wild notion. What can you do to keep them out?"

"I'll lock the door," said Swithin. "They will then think I am away." He ran down the staircase, and she could hear him hastily turning the key. Lady Constantine sighed.

"What weakness, what weakness!" she said to herself. "That envied power of self-control, where is it? That power of concealment which a woman should have, —where? To run such risks, to come here alone,—oh, if it were known! But I was always so,—always!"

She jumped up, and followed him downstairs.

CHAPTER XIII.

He was standing immediately inside the door at the bottom, though it was so dark she could hardly see him. The villagers were audibly talking just without.

"He's sure to come, rathe or late," resounded up the spiral in the note of Hezzy Biles. "He wouldn't let such a fine show as the comet makes to-night go by without peeping at it,—not Master Cleeve! Did ye bring along the flagon, Haymoss? Then we'll sit down inside 's boarden house here and wait. He'll come afore bed-time. Why, his spy-glass will

stretch out that there comet as long as Welland Lane!"

"I'd as soon miss the great peep-show that comes every year to Greenhill Fair as a sight of such a immortal spectacle as this!" said Amos Fry.

"'Immortal spectacle,'—where did ye get that choice morsel, Haymoss?" inquired Sammy Blore. "Well, well, the Lord save good scholars—and take jist a bit o' care of them that bain't! As 'tis so dark in the hut, suppose we draw out the bench into the front here, souls?"

The bench was accordingly brought forth, and in order to have a back to lean against, they placed it exactly across the door into the spiral staircase.

"Now, have ye got any backy? If ye haven't, I have," continued Sammy Blore. A striking of matches followed, and the

speaker concluded comfortably, "Now we shall do very well."

"And what do this comet mean?" asked Haymoss. "That some great tumult is going to happen, or that we shall die of a famine?"

"Famine—no!" said Nat Chapman. "That only touches such as we, and God only concerns hisself with the best breeds. It isn't to be supposed that a strange fiery lantern like that would be lighted up for folks with ten or a dozen shillings a week and their gristing, and a load o' thorn fagots when we can get 'em. If 'tis a token that He's getting hot about the ways of anybody in this parish, 'tis about my Lady Constantine's, since she is the only one with narves worth such a hint."

"As for her income,—that she's now lost."

"Ah, well; I don't take in all I hear."

Lady Constantine drew close to St. Cleeve's side, and whispered, trembling, "Do you think they will wait long? Or can we get out?"

Swithin felt the awkwardness of the situation. The men had stupidly placed the bench close to the door, which, owing to the stairs within, opened outwards; so that, at the first push by the pair inside to release themselves, the bench must have gone over, and sent the smokers sprawling on their faces. He whispered to her to ascend the column and wait till he came.

"And have the dead man left her nothing? Hey? And have he carried his inheritance into 's grave? And will his skeleton lie warm on account o't? Hee-hee!" said Haymoss.

"'Tis all swallered up," observed Hezzy Biles. "His goings-on made her miser-

able till 'a died, and if I were the woman I'd have my randys now. He ought to have bequeathed to her this young gent, Mr. St. Cleeve, as some sort of amends. I'd up and marry him, if I were she; since her downfall has brought 'em quite near together, and made him as good as she in rank, as he was afore in bone and breeding."

"D'ye think she will?" asked Sammy Blore. "Or is she meaning to enter upon a virgin life for the rest of her days?"

"I don't want to be unreverent to her ladyship; but I really don't think she is meaning any such waste of a Christian carcase. I say she's rather meaning to commit flat matrimony with somebody or other, and one young gentleman in particular."

"But the young man himself?"

"Planned, cut out, and finished for the delight of woman!"

"Yet he must be willing."

"That would soon come. If they get up this tower ruling plannards together much longer, their plannards will soon rule them together, in my way of thinking. If she've a disposition towards the knot, she can soon teach him."

"True, true, and lawfully. What before might ha' been a wrong desire is now a holy wish!"

The scales fell from Swithin St. Cleeve's eyes as he heard the words of his neighbours. How suddenly the truth dawned upon him; how it bewildered him, till he scarcely knew where he was; how he recalled the full force of what he had only half apprehended at earlier times, particularly of that sweet kiss she had impressed on his lips when she supposed him

dying,—these vivid realizations are difficult to tell in slow verbiage. He could remain there no longer, and with an electrified heart he retreated up the spiral.

He found Lady Constantine half way to the top, standing by a loop-hole; and when she spoke he discovered that she was almost in tears. "Are they gone?" she asked.

"I fear they will not go yet," he replied, with a nervous fluctuation of manner that had never before appeared in his bearing towards her.

"What shall I do?" she asked. "I ought not to be here; nobody knows that I am out of the house. Oh, this is a mistake! I must go home somehow."

"Did you hear what they were saying?"

"No," said she. "What is the matter?

Surely you are trembling? What did they say?"

"It would be the exaggeration of frankness in me to tell you."

"Is it what a woman ought not to be made acquainted with?"

"It is, in this case. It is so new and so indescribable an idea to me—that"—He leant against the concave wall, quite tremulous with strange incipient sentiments.

"What sort of an idea?" she asked gently.

"It is—an awakening. In thinking of the heaven above, I did not perceive—the—"

"Earth beneath?"

"The better heaven beneath. Pray, dear Lady Constantine, give me your hand for a moment."

She seemed startled, and the hand was not given.

"I am so anxious to get home," she repeated. "I did not mean to stay here more than five minutes!"

"I fear I am much to blame for this accident," he said. "I ought not to have intruded here. But don't grieve! I will arrange for your escape, somehow. Be good enough to follow me down."

They redescended, and, whispering to Lady Constantine to remain a few stairs behind, he began to rattle and unlock the door.

The men precipitately removed their bench, and Swithin stepped out, the light of the summer night being still enough to enable them to distinguish him.

"Well, Hezekiah, and Samuel, and Nat, how are you?" he said boldly.

"Well, sir, 'tis much as before with me," replied Nat. "One hour a week with God and the rest with the devil, as a chap may say. And really, now yer poor father's gone, I'd as lief that that Sunday hour should pass like the rest; for Pa'son Tarkenham do tease a feller's conscience that much, that church is no hollerday at all to the limbs, as it was in yer reverent father's time! But we've been waiting here, Mr. San Cleeve, supposing ye had not come."

"I have been staying at the top, and fastened the door not to be disturbed. Now I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have another engagement this evening, so that it would be inconvenient to admit you. To-morrow evening, or any evening but this, I will show you the comet and any stars you like."

They readily agreed to come the next

night, and prepared to depart. But what with the flagon, and the pipes, and the final observations, getting away was a matter of time. Meanwhile a cloud, which nobody had noticed, arose from the north overhead, and large drops of rain began to fall so rapidly that the conclave entered the hut till it should be over. St. Cleeve strolled off under the firs.

The next moment there was a rustling through the trees at another point, and a man and woman appeared. The woman took shelter under a tree, and the man, bearing wraps and umbrellas, came forward.

"My lady's man and maid," said Sammy.

"Is her ladyship here?" asked the man.

"Her ladyship keeps more kissable company," replied Nat Chapman.

"Hush!" said Blore.

"Not here? Well, to be sure! We can't find her anywhere in the wide house! I've been sent to look for her with these overclothes and umbrella. I've suffered horse-flesh traipsing up and down, and can't find her nowhere. Lord, Lord, where can she be, and two months' wages owing to me!"

anxious, Anthony Green, as I think yer name is shaped? You be not a married man?" said Hezzy.

"'Tis what they call me, neighbours, whether or no."

"But surely you was a bachelor chap by late, afore her ladyship got rid of the regular servants and took ye?"

"I were; but that's past!"

"And how came ye to bow yer head to 't, Anthony? 'Tis what you never was

inclined to. You was by no means a doting man in my time."

"Well, had I been left to my own free choice, 'tis as like as not I should ha' shunned forming such kindred, being at that time a poor day man, or weekly, at my highest luck in hiring. But 'tis wearing work to hold out against the custom of the country, and the woman wanting ye to stand by her and save her from unborn shame; so, since common usage would have it, I let myself be carried away by opinion, and took her. Though she's never once thanked me for covering her confusion, that's true! But, 'tis the way of the lost when safe, and I don't complain. Here she is, just behind, under the tree, if you'd like to see her?—a very nice homespun woman to look at, too, for all her few weather-stains . . . . . Well, well, where can my lady be? And I the

trusty jineral man,—'tis more than my place is worth to lose her! Come forward, Christiana, and talk nicely to the gentlemen."

While the woman was talking, the rain increased so much that they all retreated further into the hut. St. Cleeve, who had impatiently stood a little way off, now saw his opportunity, and, putting in his head, said, "The rain beats in; you had better shut the door. I must ascend and close up the dome."

Slamming the door upon them without ceremony, he quickly went to poor Lady Constantine in the column, and telling her they could now pass the villagers unseen, he gave her his arm. Thus he conducted her across the front of the hut into the shadows of the firs.

"I will run to the house and harness your little carriage myself," he said tenderly. "I will then take you home in it."

"No; please don't leave me alone under these dismal trees!" Neither would she hear of his getting her any wraps; and, opening her little sunshade to keep the rain out of her face, she walked with him across the insulating field, after which the trees of the park afforded her a sufficient shelter to reach home without much damage.

Swithin was too greatly affected by what he had overheard to speak much to her on the way, and protected her as if she had been a shorn lamb. After a farewell which had more meaning than sound in it, he hastened back to Rings-Hill Speer. The workfolk were still in the hut, and, by dint of friendly converse and a sip at the flagon, had so cheered Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Green that they neither thought nor cared what had become of Lady Constantine.

St. Cleeve's sudden sense of new relations with that sweet patroness had taken away in one half-hour his natural ingenuousness. Henceforth he could act a part.

"I have made all secure at the top," he said, putting his head into the hut. "I am now going home. When the rain ceases, lock this door and bring the key to my house."

CHAPTER XIV.

Rural solitude, which provides ample themes for the intellect and sweet occupations innumerable for the minor sentiments, often denies a ready object for those stronger passions that enter no less than the others into the human constitution. The suspended pathos finds its remedy in settling on the first intrusive shape that happens to be reasonably well organized for the purpose, disregarding social and other minor accessories. Where the solitude is shadowed by the secret melancholies of the solitary, this natural law is still surer in operation.

The laboured resistance which Lady Constantine's judgment had offered to her rebellious affection ere she learnt that she was a widow, and which had taken the form of sharp remorse, became now an inward bashfulness, that rendered her even more unstable of mood than she had been before. However, having discovered herself to love this handsome youth of intellectual promise, she was one of that mettle—fervid, cordial, and spontaneous—who would rather see all her affairs going to rack and ruin than abjure a tender faith in anybody to repair them. But they had already gone to rack and ruin by no fault of hers, and had left her such a painfully narrowed existence as even lent something of rationality to her attachment. Thus it was that her restful and unambitious soul found comfort in her reverses.

As for St. Cleeve, the tardiness of his awakening was the natural result of his

inexperience, combined with devotion to his hobby. But, like a spring bud hard in bursting, the delay was compensated by after speed. At once breathlessly recognizing in this fellow-watcher of the skies a handsome woman attached to him in addition to the patroness and friend, he truly translated the nearly forgotten kiss she had given him in her moment of despair. The first word of self-communing about her in this aspect begot a second, and the second a third, and so on to the end of the chapter of development which makes up the growth of a love.

Lady Constantine, in being eight or nine years his senior, was an object even better calculated to nourish a youth's first passion than a girl of his own age, superiority of experience and ripeness of emotion exercising a peculiar fascination over young men in their first ventures in this kind.

The alchemy which thus transmuted an abstracted astronomer into an eager lover —alas, must it be said, spoilt a promising young physicist to produce a commonplace inamorato?—may be almost described as working its change in one short night. Next morning he was so fascinated with the new sensation that he wanted to rush off at once to Lady Constantine, and say, "I love you true!" in the intensest tones of his mental condition, so as to register his assertion in her heart before any of those accidents which "creep in 'twixt vows, and change decrees of kings," should occur to hinder him. But his embarrassment at standing in a new position towards her would not allow him to present himself at her door in any such hurry. He waited on, as helplessly as a girl, for a chance of encountering her.

But though she had tacitly agreed to

see him on any reasonable occasion, Lady Constantine did not put herself in his way. She even kept herself out of his way. Now that for the first time he had learnt to feel a strong impatience for their meeting, her shyness for the first time led her to delay it. But given two people living in one parish, who long from the depths of their hearts to be in each other's company, what resolves of modesty, policy, pride, or apprehension will keep them for any length of time apart?

One afternoon he was watching the sun from his tower, half echoing the Greek astronomer's wish that he might be set close to that luminary for the wonder of beholding it in all its glory, at the slight penalty of being utterly consumed the next instant. He glanced over the high-road between the field and the park (which sublunary features now too often distracted

his attention from his telescope), and saw her passing along that way.

She was seated in the donkey-carriage, that had now taken the place of her landau, the white animal looking no larger than a cat at that distance. The buttoned boy, who represented both coachman and footman, walked alongside the animal's head at a solemn pace; the dog stalked at the distance of a yard behind the vehicle, without indulging in a single gambol; and the whole turn-out resembled in dignity a dwarfed state procession.

Here was an excellent opportunity but for two obstructions: the boy, who might be curious; and the dog, who might bark and attract the attention of any labourers or servants near. Yet the risk was to be run, and, knowing that she would soon turn up a certain shady lane at right angles to the road she had followed, he ran hastily

down the staircase, crossed the barley (which now covered the field) by the path not more than a foot wide, that he had trodden for himself, and got into the lane at the other end. By slowly walking along it in the direction of the turnpike-road he soon had the satisfaction of seeing her coming. To his surprise, he also had the additional satisfaction of perceiving that neither boy nor dog was in her company.

They both blushed as they approached, she from sex, he from inexperience. One thing she seemed to see in a moment, that in the interval of her absence St. Cleeve had become a man; and as he greeted her with this new and maturer light in his eyes, she could not hide her embarrassment, or meet their fire.

"I have just sent my page across to the column with your book on Cometary Nuclei," she said softly; "that you might

not have to come to the house for it. I did not know I should meet you here."

"Didn't you wish me to come to the house for it?"

"I did not, frankly. You know why, do you not?"

"Yes, I know. Well, my longing is at rest. I have met you again. But are you unwell, that you drive out in this chair?"

"No; I walked out this morning, and am a little tired."

"I have been looking for you night and day. Why do you turn your face aside? You used not to be so." Her hand rested on the side of the chair, and he took it. "Do you know that since we last met, I have been thinking of you—daring to think of you—as I never thought of you before?"

"Yes, I know it."

"How did you know?"

"I saw it in your face when you came up."

"Well, I suppose I ought not to think of you so. And yet, had I not learnt to, I should never fully have felt how gentle and sweet you are. Only think of my loss if I had lived and died without seeing more in you than in astronomy! But I shall never cease to do so now. When you talk I shall love your understanding; when you are silent I shall love your face. But how shall I know that you care to be so much to me?"

Her manner was disturbed as she recognized the impending self-surrender, which she knew not how to resist, and was not altogether at ease in welcoming.

"Oh, Lady Constantine," he continued, bending over her, "give me some proof more than mere seeming and inference, which are all I have at present, that you

don't think this I tell you of presumption in me! I have been unable to do anything since I last saw you for pondering uncertainly on this. Some proof, or little sign, that we are one in heart!"

A blush settled anew on her face; and half in effort, half in spontaneity, she put her finger on her cheek. He respectfully, almost devotionally, kissed the spot.

"Does that suffice?" she asked, scarcely giving her words voice.

"Yes; I am convinced."

"Then that must be the end. Let me drive on; the boy will be back again soon." She spoke hastily, and looked askance, to hide the heat of her cheek.

"No; the tower door is open, and he will go to the top, and waste his time in looking through the telescope."

"Then you should rush back, for he will do some damage."

"No; he may do what he likes, tinker and spoil the instrument, destroy my papers,—anything, so that he will stay there and leave us alone."

She glanced up with a species of pained pleasure.

"You never used to feel like that!" she said, and there was keen self-reproach in her voice. "You were once so devoted to your science, that the thought of an intruder into your temple would have driven you wild. Now you don't care; and who is to blame? Ah, not you, not you!"

The animal ambled on with her, and he, leaning on the side of the little vehicle, kept her company.

"Well, don't let us think of that," he said. "I offer myself and all my energies, frankly and entirely, to you, my dear, dear lady, whose I shall be always! But my words in telling you this will only injure

my meaning, instead of emphasize it. In expressing, even to myself, my thoughts of you, I find that I fall into phrases which, as a critic, I should hitherto have heartily despised for their commonness. What's the use of saying, for instance, as I have just said, that I give myself entirely to you, and shall be yours always,—that you have my devotion, my highest homage? Those words have been used so frequently in a flippant manner that honest use of them is not distinguishable from the unreal." He turned to her, and added, smiling, "Your eyes are to be my stars for the future."

"Yes, I know it,—I know it, and all you would say! I dreaded even while I hoped for this, my dear young friend," she replied, her eyes being full of tears. "I am injuring you; who knows that I am not ruining your future,—I who ought to know better? Nothing can come of this,—

nothing must,—and I am only wasting your time. Why have I drawn you off from a grand celestial study to study poor lonely me? Say you will never despise me, when you get older, for this episode in our lives. But you will,—I know you will! All men do, when they have been attracted in their unsuspecting youth, as I have attracted you. I ought to have kept my resolve."

"What was that?"

"To bear anything rather than draw you from your high purpose; to be like the noble citizen of old Greece, who, attending a sacrifice, let himself be burnt to the bone by a coal that jumped into his sleeve rather than disturb the sacred ceremony."

"But can I not study and love both?"

"I hope so,—I earnestly hope so. But you'll be the first if you do, and I am the responsible one if you do not."

"You speak as if I were quite a child, and you immensely older. Why, how old do you think I am? I am twenty."

"You seem younger. Well, that's so much the better. Twenty sounds strong and firm. How old do you think I am?"

"I have never thought of considering." He innocently turned to scrutinize her face. She winced a little. But the instinct was premature. Time had taken no liberties with her features as yet; nor had trouble very roughly handled her, to outward view.

"I will tell you," she replied, speaking almost with physical pain, yet as if determination should carry her through. "I am eight-and-twenty—nearly—I mean a little more, a few months more. Am I not a fearful deal older than you?"

"At first it seems a great deal," he

answered, musing. "But it doesn't seem much when one gets used to it."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed. "It *is* a good deal."

"Very well, then, sweetest Lady Constantine, let it be," he said gently.

"You should not let it be! A polite man would have flatly contradicted me. . . . Oh, I am ashamed of this!" she added, a moment after, with a subdued, sad look upon the ground. "I am speaking by the card of the outer world, which I have left behind utterly; no such lip-service is known in your sphere. I care nothing for those things, really; but that which is called the Eve in us will out sometimes. Well, we will forget that now, as we must, at no very distant date, forget all the rest of this."

He walked beside her thoughtfully awhile, with his eyes also bent on the road.

"Why must we forget it all?" he inquired.

"It is only an interlude."

"An interlude! It is no interlude to me. Oh, how can you talk so lightly of this, Lady Constantine? And yet, if I were to go away from here, I might, perhaps, soon reduce it to an interlude! Yes," he resumed impulsively, "I will go away. Love dies, and it is just as well to strangle it in its birth; it can only die once! I'll go."

"No, no!" she said, looking up apprehensively. "I misled you. It is no interlude to me,—it is tragical. I only meant that from a worldly point of view it is an interlude, which we should try to forget. But the world is not all. You will not go away?"

But he continued, drearily, "Yes, yes, I see it all; you have enlightened me. It will be hurting your prospects even more

than mine, if I stay. Now Sir Blount is dead, you are free again,—may marry where you will, but for this fancy of ours. I'll leave Welland, before harm comes of my staying."

"Don't decide to do a thing so rash!" she begged, seizing his hand, and looking miserable at the effect of her words. "I shall have nobody left in the world to care for! And now I have given you the great telescope, and lent you the column, it would be ungrateful to go away! I was wrong; believe me that I did not mean that it was a mere interlude to *me*. Oh, if you only knew how very, very far it is from that! It is my doubt of the result to you that makes me speak so slightingly."

They were now approaching cross-roads, and, casually looking up, they beheld, thirty or forty yards beyond the crossing, Mr. Torkingham, who was leaning over a

gate, his back being towards them. As yet he had not recognized their approach.

The master-passion had already supplanted St. Cleeve's natural ingenuousness by subtlety.

"Would it be well for us to meet Mr. Torkingham just now?" he began.

"Certainly not," she said hastily, and pulling the rein she instantly drove down the right-hand road. "I cannot meet anybody!" she murmured. "Would it not be better that you leave me now?—not for my pleasure, but that there may arise no distressing tales about us before we know—how to act in this—this"—(she smiled faintly at him) "heartaching extremity!"

They were passing under a huge oak-tree, whose limbs, irregular with shoulders, knuckles, and elbows, stretched horizontally over the lane in a manner recalling

Absalom's death. A slight rustling was perceptible amid the leafage as they drew out from beneath it, and, turning up his eyes, Swithin saw that very buttoned page, whose advent they had dreaded, looking down with interest at them from a perch not much higher than a yard above their heads. He had a bunch of oak-apples in hand, plainly the object of his climb, and was furtively watching Lady Constantine with the hope that she might not see him. But that she had already done, though she did not reveal it, and, fearing that the latter words of their conversation had been overheard, they spoke not till they had passed the next turning.

She stretched out her hand to his. "This must not go on," she said imploringly. "My anxiety as to what may be said of such methods of meeting makes me too unhappy. See what has happened!"

She could not help smiling. "Out of the frying-pan into the fire! After meanly turning to avoid the parson, we have rushed into a worse publicity. It is too humiliating to have to avoid people, and lowers both you and me. The only remedy is not to meet."

"Very well," said Swithin, with a sigh. "So it shall be."

And with smiles that might more truly have been tears they parted there and then.

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